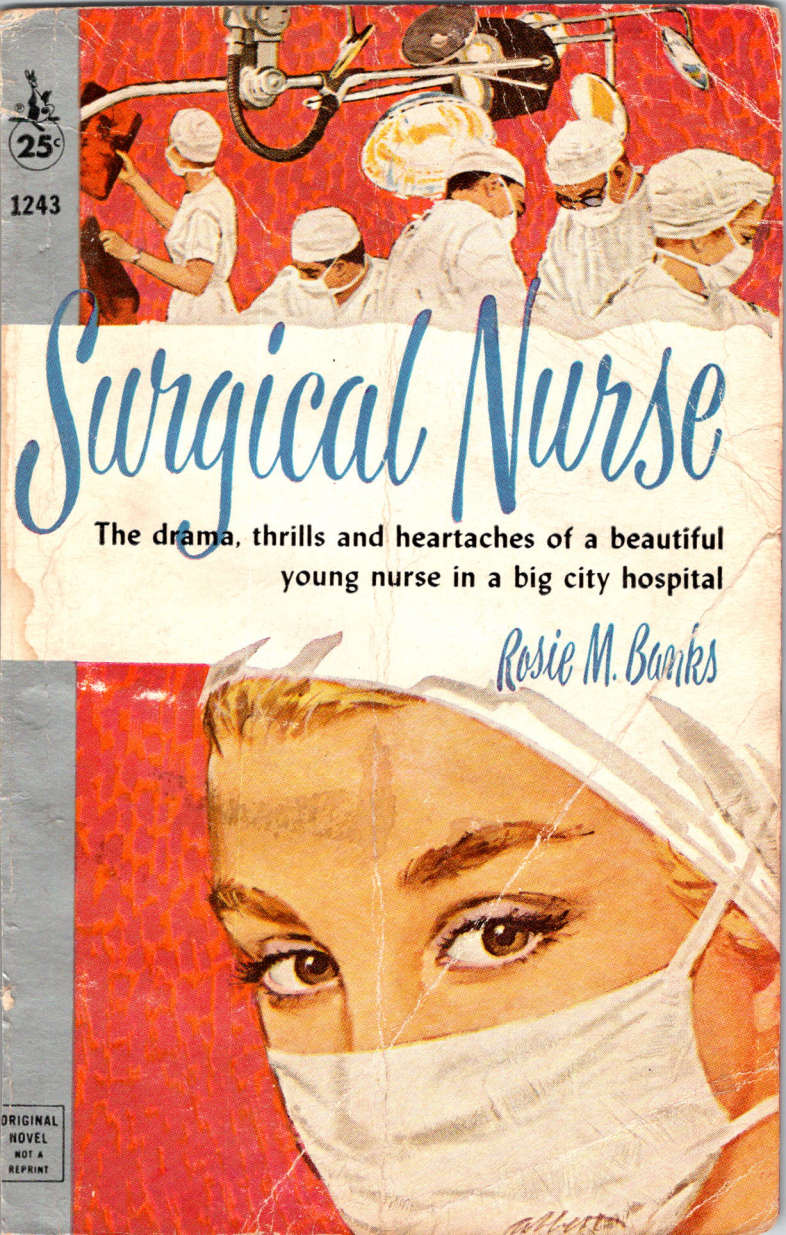
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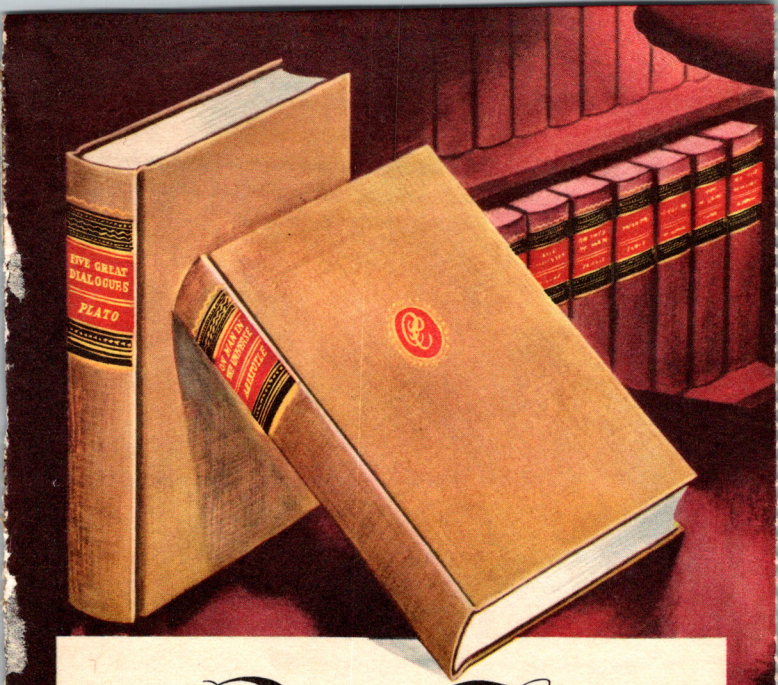

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SURGICAL NURSE

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SURGICAL NURSE

CHAPTER 1

THE HOSPITAL was in uptown Manhattan. Signs on the avenue and streets cautioned motorists to be quiet and not sound their horns. The hospital was a nerve center of the city. Here citizens were born; here they died or were cured or healed. The citizens created the hospital and the hospital in turn tended to their needs, but there was an aloofness about the hospital and certainly no humility. It was as if the hospital said, "We know all about you. We know how your heart beats and what ails your liver. We know the moment of your birth and sometimes we can prophesy the moment of your death. We fight for you and we take care of you. When you are sick we are your doctors and nurses, your operating machines and beds. We are your friends, but we are your hospital friends, not your personal friends. Except wherein it advances our medical knowledge and assists our treatment of you, we wish to know nothing of your personal life. And as for us, so far as you are concerned, we have no such thing as a private life. We are your doctors and your operating machines. . . ."

Thus, it seemed to a young girl sitting on a park bench on a warm spring morning and looking at its multifarious buildings, would the hospital speak. The object all sublime was to be accurate and efficient and nothing more. One

must be kind to a patient, of course, and even personal, within reason and if one chose. But a gentle remoteness to one and all—granted that this could not uniformly be achieved, and granted, she reflected wryly, that a very rich potential benefactor of the hospital must surely get preferential treatment—was still the ideal. But never, never under any circumstances, must doctor or nurse betray by word or gesture that anything might be wrong with himself. Such personal problems as might beset a young nurse or a doctor must be left outside the building.

So thought the young girl sitting on the park bench. She was a nurse, and she worked in the hospital she was now observing. It was a giant, sprawling caravansary; its buildings recorded not only the landmarks on the hospital's trail to fame and fortune but also the evolution of American taste in architecture. The original building, now used mostly for offices, was of heavy gray stone, a sort of derivation from the Pitti Palace in Florence, and very inefficient-looking and old-fashioned. Then had come more buildings, clustered to the north, south, east, and west of the first structure; and each had been a little larger than its predecessor and each the latest word in medical facilities up to that time and each the very latest embodiment of current architectural taste. Then came the huge brick pavilion with marble facing—the pride of 1920. And last, the gleaming glass-and-aluminum Apdorpf Pavilion, with towers stretching to the sky—the pride of 1950.

The young girl looked at her wrist watch, and slowly rose and walked to her hospital. I'll try, I'll try, she thought, to check my problems at the door. For indeed she had problems, and she knew of others in that hospital who had theirs, too. For while the hospital maintained an impassive and uncommunicative face to the public, it was in its own right and confines a city like any other, with its

happinesses and heartbreaks, its hopes and despairs, its doubts and fears.

She walked through the revolving door, leaving behind her the spring freshness of the blue-gold-and-green city. The trapped antiseptic smell of the hospital was at first a shock and then quickly became familiar. She secured her coat and handbag in her locker, smoothed her uniform, adjusted her cap, and took the elevator to the operating floor. She opened a door marked NO ADMITTANCE and put on a sterile mask and coat. Then she took her place by the operating table, and waited for the patient to be wheeled in.

It was a neck radical.

A surgical phrase. A hospital phrase. A something that everyone in the know knew, that the doctors knew and the nurses knew, but never, never the patient.

It could hurt.

It could, subtly and easily, presage death.

But never, never tell the patient. Double-talk the patient, keep the patient at ease, never worry the patient.

Althea—that was her name and she hated it—knew this theory, and this she hated, too. She was a surgical nurse and a good one, but because of her own intense desire to face facts as facts, she believed in telling patients what ailed them. She was unusual in this. She was unusual in other ways, too.

She watched Dr. Meikeljohn, the incredibly young chief of Head and Neck, anticipating his moves and ready for his requests. He had made an H-type incision in the left side of the neck and was removing certain nodes swiftly, expertly. The duty of these nodes—"little garbage pails," somebody at school had called them—was to withdraw poisons coursing through the body and assimilate them. During the performance of this sanitary exercise the nodes

could themselves become infected and, untended, this could lead inexorably to cancer.

Althea knew the medical history of the patient now on the table, as indeed she knew the records of all her charges. Age, fifty-one; good heart and lungs for his age; a sedentary job and no exercise, therefore overweight but not dangerously so; no serious previous illness. He had gone to his dentist for a routine check-up and had complained of a minor irritation in the floor of the mouth. To be on the safe side the dentist had ordered a biopsy, which had shown no definite evidence of disease but an inclination toward it. Cathode rays had been shot into the area, but still the doctors had not been satisfied, and when Meikeljohn had been called in, his decision had been to operate.

As almost always, he had been right. The nodes he was now removing were surely infected, not badly, but let alone, they would seriously have degenerated in a few months. A stitch in time, Althea thought, smiling to herself, as Dr. Meikeljohn now began, with his always amazing virtuosity, the sutures.

He has performed hundreds of these operations, thought Althea. Is each new to him? Or does he run the risk of boredom?—of a boredom that could lead to a disastrous inattention. Or was he possibly like an actor who has learned his part perfectly and can perform it by rote while thinking of something else, and is so well trained that even to the unexpected he responds quickly and correctly? If this were so, it would be a denial of what she had been thinking in the park and Dr. Meikeljohn *could* bring into the hospital troubles he should have left outside.

He had his worries. Of that she was sure. Who, for the

matter of that, didn't? And why was she anyway worrying about Dr. Mike?

She felt herself growing irritated—irritated by her senseless concern over the doctor and by her inability to understand his psychology. His wife, Marcia, was childless and rich, related by the financially attractive marriages of most of her forebears to most of the founders and benefactors of the hospital. (She was, for instance, the grandniece of the Apdorpf in whose honor the aluminum-and-glass pavilion had been erected.) She made no secret of her aggressive desire for the advancement of her husband, but it was also whispered in the corridors that Dr. Mike didn't need that marriage—he was brilliant enough to succeed on his own. Hal Meikeljohn was popular with the staff of the hospital, and the thought that he had contracted a *mariage de convenance* with an heiress influential in hospital affairs was distasteful to most of them. But the rumor was given credence by the other whispers in the hospital, that the marriage was loveless. Rumor feeding rumor . . .

Althea thought he was a lonely man. Perhaps his dedication to the hospital and to his operating room did stem partly from the fact that his home was not a pleasant place. The lights often burned late in his office, where he sat reviewing his cases and studying the interminable line of papers and articles and journals that cross a surgeon's desk. Certainly Marcia, eagerly though she pushed for her husband's success, sometimes seemed jealous of his time-consuming profession. As Joe is of mine, Althea silently added.

"All right, that will do," said Hal Meikeljohn briskly. "Take him to the recovery room, please. He should come to around four thirty.

"You, Miss Bellamy, you are his four-to-midnight nurse.

Stand by and see to it he's taken to his room properly and in good time. I'll look in on him in the recovery room in an hour or so unless something happens, but it won't. Call me on the intercom if you want me; I'm seeing some other patients.

"And you, Miss Jones," he said suddenly and coldly, "where were you the last few minutes?" And without waiting for a reply, he stalked from the room.

A fair question.

She flushed behind her mask as she felt the surprised eyes of the others upon her. She must have been most obvious, most annoying, to have made him reprimand her in the open like that. It was unlike him. She knew that, as did her fellows, but she felt no resentment, for she surely and certainly had been at fault. Daydreaming, inattention—the very faults she had half attributed to him. What was the matter with her? Was she getting stale and tired —in her very early twenties, stale and tired? Did she need a vacation? Or a change of routine? —some different kind of nursing possibly? Or could it be the seeming impossibility of making up her mind about Joe? Althea did not have the answer. But she felt with the eerie certainty of a sibyl that there was looming for her a most important turning point in her life.

She would have been most surprised, and no doubt indignant, if she had heard the report Nurse Ruth Bellamy gave of the incident the next morning to her sister, Betty. "I've never heard him speak like that before. Not in front of the rest of us. You do something wrong, and he asks you quietly to come up to his office and he talks to you about it. If you don't tell, nobody's likely to know you've been there at all.

"You know what, Betty? I think he's in love with her. That would account for it. You're apt to blow up at some-

body you're in love with when you wouldn't with just anybody. Poor kids. She's got a fella nuts about her, and he, the Doc, he's got a wife. But I'll bet that's it. They're in love and they haven't the faintest idea that it's going on. Yet."

And on that suddenly ominous word Ruth Bellamy let her thoughts trail away to matters of more immediate concern to herself. And Betty.

There is a tendency among families named Jones to feel a diffidence about the plainness of their name, and they are therefore likely to foist upon their offspring something pretty fancy in the way of given names. In this respect no Jones ever matched the parents of Inigo, the famed seventeenth-century architect, but Althea had been a good try for the girl's late father, a minor accountant for a minor business firm. Mrs. Jones had had nothing to say in the matter. Browbeaten at the office, Mr. Jones had taken it out by trying to be a tyrant at home. He hadn't been very successful at it, contriving mostly to be merely disagreeable, but he had had his way in naming his only child. He hadn't been sure where he had found the name and when asked would look knowing and somehow mysterious and say, "I read it in a book." Whether true or not, it was an answer eminently satisfactory.

For a girl who was to become a nurse the name was not a singularly happy choice. Althea, mythology tells us, was responsible for taking the life of her only son after he, in one of those intricate misunderstandings that embellish Greek mythology, had caused the death of her brothers, his uncles. Granted the provocation to Althea, her action in killing her son must still be considered conduct unbecoming a nurse. But Mr. Jones had thought the name beautiful and unusual and had been mightily pleased with

his choice. In his latter years, when the bottle had become instead of a solace a constant and needed companion, he had taken to ogling roguishly and singing "Althea in my dreams . . ." He must have done this a hundred times and more, and it had never failed to reduce him to helpless and moist mirth. It was probably for this reason that Althea so hated her name.

The miracle of what was truly unusual in Althea was being unveiled now. The operation over, Althea was taking off her mask. The remaining doctors, and even the nurses, without jealousy, watched. For Althea had one of the most beautiful faces any of them had ever seen. And although they were all accustomed to seeing it daily in the manifold hospital rooms she graced, seeing it re-emerge from behind a surgical mask always produced a moment of acute pleasure. They wanted to see it as a man might wish to watch the moon, not all night long but each night simply to see it rise. Usually, if the operation had been successful, Althea wore a slow smile. But although today's had been a success, Althea's face was shadowed and sad.

Althea was conscious of her beauty but not obsessed by it. She treated it quite objectively and indifferently, as she might a handsome possession—a bracelet or a handbag. She did not rely upon it nor did she use it. She was Grecian in type, with hair of palest gold and large gray eyes set wide apart. Her mouth was what Edgar Saltus described as a "scarlet thread"; a slightly more generous use of lipstick could render it irresistible, but Althea rarely gave it that application. So pure and classical was this beauty as to seem almost without sex. It was perhaps for this reason that other nurses of warmer and more mundane charms felt no jealousy toward her; indeed some were even inclined to pity her. Men admired Althea as they

would a statue; few thought of the legend (and the fact) that marble can be warmed and indeed become flesh. Dr. Meikeljohn thought of it and it perturbed him, for he was a married man. Joe Saylor thought of it and it perturbed him, too, for he was single.

Joe Saylor (Joseph de P. Saylor III in the Social Register) was a commercial artist and a good one. You saw his illustrations, bright in four-color process, inside magazines and on the covers; you saw them in posters and advertisements. He knew all the tricks of the trade: how, for instance, to pose his models effectively yet so arrange the composition that he had to show only one arm and hand, thereby saving work and time. He was enormously in demand, professionally as well as socially.

One of his classmates at Princeton had said of him, "Fortune didn't smile on Joe, she laughed in glee." It was true. He was tall and good-looking, he was the inheritor of considerable wealth, he was enormously talented. In his senior year at Princeton he had written most of the words and music of the Triangle Club show as well as designed the costumes and sets. It was a tour de force that had never before been accomplished. Joe's charm was incandescent, and like a bulb he could turn it off or on. He could scarcely have escaped being spoiled, and he had not escaped. Conquests had always come easily to him except for Althea, and this had lately put him in an ugly mood. Because he was being denied Althea, he had persuaded himself he was genuinely in love with her—he believed it, and surely there was some truth in it—and tonight, as he had often done before, he was telling her so. He was asking her to marry him, and this he had never asked of any other girl.

"Althea," he was saying, "give it up. I know you want

to help humanity. And the Hospital. We've been through all that. I promise you can do more for your hospital seated opposite me at our dinner table than assisting at three thousand operating tables."

Oh no, she thought, not again, and yet he was right. Nurses worked, nurses were paid, nurses were needed, but it wasn't nurses who raised money for the hospital; it was the heads of committees.

Mrs. Joseph Saylor III would surely be a committee head, she mused. As such, she would serve with and as an equal of Mrs. Hal Meikeljohn. Marcia knew Althea as one of her husband's nurses, and when she ran into her always smiled graciously as if she weren't there. But if I married Joe it would be different, thought Althea. She would read about herself in the papers, even as Mrs. Meikeljohn did. "The silver dress ball given last night at the Waldorf-Astoria for the benefit of the Hospital Fund was a resounding success socially, artistically—and financially. Much of the credit must go to Mrs. Joseph Saylor III, whose silver-lamé gown, slashed by a deep-purple sash and an enormous bow, was flown in from Paris," etc., etc. Ah yes, it would not be unpleasant to be married to Joe, to have all that money, to have a maid and not have to rinse the coffee cup every morning. *Perhaps it is even your duty,* she said to herself, trying to persuade herself, *to marry this young man, even though you do not completely love him. You could do much good with the money he so easily wastes,* she reasoned. *You could do worse than marry the man,* who was now seductively saying,

"Althea, dear, you are too beautiful a woman to hide your face behind a surgical mask. Leave that to others. Althea, *dammit,* are you at least listening?"

She was, but she didn't have to. She knew the theme by heart. The speech was as familiar to her as the dis-

creetly rich restaurant where Joe had a permanently reserved table.

"Joe . . . I . . . " she was faltering, in an agony of indecision.

She was not being fair and she knew it, and the knowledge did not lead to peace of mind. Few things did these days. That sibyl who at the operating table the other day had suggested she was at a turning point in her life might have given her a clue as to which way to turn, but did not. Althea should make up her mind—for Joe's sake and her own. It was unfair to keep him dangling, and she had noticed that he had been drinking more of late. Tonight he seemed particularly reckless. She almost wished that something outside herself would make the decision for her. Right now, a thing not usual with her, she felt apathetic, almost without will.

She cupped her chin in her right hand and she smiled at Joe, a sad smile of apology.

"Can't you answer?"

What was the question? To keep on being a nurse or to marry Joe? Joe's theory seemed to be she couldn't do both. Yet nurses married and kept on being nurses. Joe's terms were difficult.

"No, Joe, I can't answer. I am so fond of you, Joe. . . ."

"To hell with that *fond;* that's not what I want."

She bridled. "Joe," she said firmly, "be quiet and keep civil."

The subdued lighting of the restaurant struck little brilliant highlights from her pale gold hair, giving her a halo of purity and desirability.

"Don't look so damned ethereal," Joe said irrelevantly, hurt and blindly seeking to hurt. "You're always talking and acting like some damned angel of mercy. Why don't you get yourself some real mercy and turn into a woman?"

Joe, as always, had ordered set upon the table a bottle of that priceless Scotch Chivas Regal (for Althea he had ordered with equal discrimination a Château Margaux, 1953). Tonight, however, he was betraying his taste and drinking too much by far. He glared sullenly at Althea as if goading her into losing her temper.

But Althea spoke evenly.

"Joe," she said, "I *will* give you an answer. I am a surgical nurse. I admire surgery, and surgery is a clean cut. The answer must be no. A clean no."

Joe poured himself another drink but said nothing. There was more to come, and he waited.

"I am talking to myself as well as to you. You are a charming man, and I believe sincerely that if you worked at it you could be an important artist. And I have been beguiled by the thought of helping you become a real artist instead of a slick illustrator."

Joe nearly blew up at that but contained himself, partly because he thought maybe she *wanted* him to make a scene. He was holding onto himself because he knew his turn was to come; he was treating the suddenly arisen situation like an athletic contest or possibly a game of chess, and he wanted to be in shape when it was time for him to attack.

"You are a tempting man. How easily you can make a girl love you or think she loves you. And why not face it? There is your money. You know perfectly well that is a temptation. You were using it as such tonight.

"But the answer must be no. If there is the slightest shadow of doubt in a girl's mind—and there is in mine—the answer must be no. As I said: a clean no."

She was spent. She lowered her eyes and stared dazedly at the shining white tablecloth and her ruby glass of wine

and saw nothing at all. As if from a long distance, darkly, she waited to hear what Joe would say.

He began softly. For the first time in their relationship they seemed to have reached a showdown, a moment of decision, and it was Joe's goal now to alter that decision, or failing that, at least postpone it for alteration later on. Of one thing he was now certain: never had he been so sure that Althea must not get away from him. And flushed with the whiskey of which he had consumed too much, never had he felt so confident.

"That isn't final, dear, it can't be final. There's never been a girl in the world who accepted a proposal of marriage without some shadow of doubt, as you put it. It probably isn't doubt, anyway; it's just that you're a touch scared, as any girl might be.

"It's funny, when you think of it. I never thought the competent, complacent Althea would ever act scared."

The word *complacent* was a deliberate taunt to get back at her for *slick illustrator*. He was trying to win her, but if disparagements were to be bandied about he wanted the score even.

"You've been looking tired lately," he went on. Althea seemingly had not noticed his gibe. "Why don't you take a little time off and think it out. It's a good idea, darling. Give you perspective. You'll see it's logical and good for us to be together."

Althea sat silent, eyes still lowered. Joe couldn't tell whether he had made the slightest impression upon her.

It was typical of Joe that although he was deadly serious now in his pursuit of Althea, he made of it something of a game. He felt like a general storming a hill, or rather like an advertising manager planning a campaign. He decided now on a light attack.

"Thank you, by the way, for saying I am tempting. It's

the kind of thing a man likes to hear. I must of course remind you of what Oscar Wilde said about temptation. He said the only way to get rid of it is to yield to it. That is what I'm prescribing for you."

He was rewarded with the thinnest of smiles.

"Well, what do you say, Althea?"

"I've said it. I've said no. You are as nimble with words as with your paintbrushes, but I've said it. When in doubt say no."

"People have been known to change their minds, you know."

"I know. But don't wait for me. Oh, Joe," she cried despairingly, "I do love you, but I'm not in love with you. There's such a difference."

"Althea, be reasonable. You'll get to love me, to be in love with me. Give it a try, Althea. If it doesn't work, I won't make it tough for you. There's always divorce."

Althea recoiled. And then, for probably the first time in her adult life, she lost control of herself. She threw her glass of wine. She aimed it at, and struck, a marble copy of Houdon's famous bust of Marie Antoinette. That poor queen, whose blood was shed because of a revolution she did indeed help provoke, was now incarnadined again because of a quarrel she had nothing to do with.

Over the restaurant there came a swift hush, and half a hundred pairs of eyes gazed upon Joe's table. Then, as if directed by an invisible Toscanini, all eyes were at once averted and their owners elaborately occupied themselves with their own affairs. A waiter wiped a napkin over the queen's pinkish face, blew her nose, and returned her to her placid and satiny whiteness.

Althea had intended to rise and walk out of the dining room. She could see her exit, the headwaiter bowing obsequiously and imperturbably—*regal* would have been

the term for it. Instead she found herself giggling, helplessly giggling.

"Stop it, Althea. You didn't understand me. Stop it."

She did stop.

"Oh yes, I understand. Very well. Completely. Clearly. We get married and have a jolly honeymoon. Where had you planned? Majorca? St. Moritz? Or perhaps Japan, our new ally?

"What are you thinking of in your selfish way? 'The fashionable illustrator J. Saylor III [thus he signed his pictures] and his bride, the former Miss Althea Jones (it sounds sort of shabby, doesn't it?), a former nurse and sometimes a model for his well-known paintings, attended the'— What in hell would we attend, Joe?"

"I don't know what we attended, and don't call yourself a model. Models are professional, and you're not."

It was true that Althea had posed for Joe. Obsessed, as he was, by the classical beauty of her face, he had made many studies of her, and one, a Red Cross poster, had won him an award. But, still, she was not a model in Joe's present and professional use of the noun, and he was eager to argue about this because in the heat of quarrel they were beginning to draw fine distinctions.

And Althea, directly and simply, drew the very distinction that had caused her to flame with humiliation and even advertise denigration by throwing her glass of wine at the defenseless Marie Antoinette.

Very quietly, very hurt and bewildered, she said, "Do you know that you have made me a proposition, not a proposal?"

He had no answer.

In his estimation, and his intent, she was wrong, but it was difficult to say so—now, particularly, when Althea, usually so calm, looked so chagrined, so, even, aflame. He

chose what he semi-humorously called the "coward's way out"; he took a drink of his precious Chivas Regal.

And he said nothing. Forcing her to speak.

Which she did, and there was naught for her to say but the phrases and sentences heard a million times:

"I am sorry. I am sorry it turned out this way. I'd like to go home now. I'd rather go alone.

"Thank you, Joe. Good night."

And he, too, in the sentiments also heard a million times:

"Don't be silly, Althea. I'll drop you. Don't worry."

And in awkward silence they rose to leave.

Joe's favorite restaurant was an interesting spot. It knew more about its patrons (*customers* would not have been sufficiently chic a label) than their in-laws. The owners had made a small fortune from bootlegging during the Prohibition era, and from even less respectable pursuits before that silly error in morals and judgment. Now their emporium was a wondrous combination of Empire decoration (blue banquettes, white walls, and ruby-red velvet draperies) patriotically desecrated by the presence here and there of an unexploded grenade or an olive-green helmet, which bore witness that one of the nephews had served in the Marines (he was now at Temple University, in Philadelphia, taking a course in business administration). Everything that Joe and Althea had said to one another had been discreetly overheard and reported. The restaurant was wholeheartedly in support of Joe; it was he who had the money. They admired Althea's beauty, but what they really loved was the beauty of her escort's signature on a large dinner check. The name of Althea Jones did not connote such windfalls; that of Mrs. Joseph de P. Saylor III did. It was a highly successful restaurant.

In the lobby Bill, who was the sort of super-doorman who can get you tickets to "My Fair Lady" or, at the very latest moment, ringside seats to the most popular fight, snapped his fingers and Althea's modest stole was whisked from the obscurity of a cloakroom to the open. Joe took it away from the proffering servant and settled it about her shoulders, while some other attendant brought him his own lightweight English coat and his Italian hat. Althea, drained now, distant and tired, noticed the difference between these habiliments: her stole, she remembered, had cost $29.95 at a sale. The wife of Joe Saylor would spend more than that for a pair of shoes.

In silence they rode in a taxi to the East Thirties of Manhattan, where she had a ground-floor apartment in a converted brownstone. In silence he led her to her basement door, and as she unlocked and opened it, he left her to enter a night as silent and uncommunicative as they.

CHAPTER 2

MARCIA MEIKELJOHN was playing the piano. Her lustrous blue-black hair was swept back from her ivory forehead and tumbled in insolent splendor down her back. She wore a tangerine velvet hostess gown striated with gold-thread designs, which had been made specially for her when last she was in Italy. The notes of the piano

rumbled where they should have tinkled and soared, but Marcia, determinedly unconcerned about her pianistic shortcomings, enjoyed the picture: sleek, chic, and voluptuous; playing for her husband, the most brilliant, the most promising surgeon in two decades of the Hospital's meticulously kept records.

The music room was on the second floor of her house in the East Sixties. It was "their" house by courtesy of her father. He had wanted it to belong to them both—and indeed had listed it with the real estate board as joint-ownership property—but Hal had insisted that Marcia was sole possessor, and he always spoke of it to her as "your" house. This had caused arguments in which both of them were at fault and knew it. The room was elegantly austere: the floor was highly polished parquetry, and the chairs, Empire in style (like Joe's restaurant), were gilt wood, red velvet, and uncomfortable. The house had been designed around four marble columns from a Roman forum, the acquisition of a Prix de Rome architect, and this had resulted in a two-and-a-half-story enclosed courtyard in the center of the building. The music room had casement windows opening upon this courtyard; when Marcia gave a dance she lodged the orchestra in the music room, where she was now playing, and the couples tripped their light or heavy fantastics below, on a marble floor. There was a floor-to-ceiling mirror on the west wall of the music room, and against this was a marble-topped table (a pink breccia, it was—like Marcia's gown—from Italy), and on top of that was a statue of two Cupids embracing.

Marcia was playing Chopin, and her husband—far more sophisticated now than three years before, when he had married her, and with his mind still mostly upon affairs at the hospital—wondered idly about Chopin's influence

upon the world of manners. Surely, he thought, had there not flowed through the genius of that Polish Frenchman such wondrous fountainlike melodies, there would have been fewer society piano players like Marcia. And would not this be something to be wished for?

Marcia was less talented than determined. She wanted you to know she knew what she knew; she bulldozed through the delicacies of Chopin, striking the keys as if she hated them. This was characteristic of Marcia; she was a driving woman. Indeed she had driven Hal into marriage. So sternly, so firmly, and so one-thoughtedly that he had hardly known what struck him.

There had been a dance on Long Island. Hal Meikeljohn was then an interne in the Hospital entirely because a New York City uncle had said he would add to Hal's meager pay if he attended a hospital in the city of the uncle's choice. Hal, a Quaker from Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, outside Philadelphia, had had every intention of working in one of his home-state institutions, but his uncle, hating Philadelphia for some obscure reason, had moved to New York and made his offer. The subsidy was for him a private revenge on the City of Brotherly Love, but for Hal, of course, it was a windfall. Accepting this money never troubled his conscience; the uncle was rich (he, incidentally, never spoke to or saw Hal once he was in New York), he could afford the weird gesture, and so far as Hal was concerned there was little difference between the educational facilities of the two cities. So Hal had become an interne in one of the giant caravansaries that are most New York City hospitals. And because things inexorably lead to other things, he was at this dance on Long Island.

Marcia Olmsted had arranged a dinner party before the dance, and Hal was present as a stranger and a house guest. Because he was a newcomer to her house and indeed to most of the persons at her table, he was seated to her right—a place ironically reserved by the hostesses' manual for the famous guest of honor or for the totally unknown. Marcia did not know Hal; a cousin of hers, also an interne at the Hospital and sympathetic to Hal's loneliness in a city still strange to him, had begged the invitation. This, of course, had been readily granted, for Marcia loved "people . . . people . . . people" and liked to think her dining-room table a kind of forum of the arts and sciences. It was truly nothing of the sort—and yet it was close to it. But surely it seemed so to Hal, who, hypnotized, watched Marcia Olmsted and thought excitedly:

. . . dark, dynamic, quick, mercurial. Teasing. She seems to be talking to you beyond the confines of politeness. She seems interested, Hal, she seems interested. . . .

Marcia was an assured and predatory animal. She meant no harm—though occasionally she caused it. She truly believed the world revolved about her; it was bewildering to her if someone did not immediately understand that frame of reference. She was a beautiful woman; she was occasionally a bright woman; she was inescapably a selfish woman.

She looked smilingly to her right, at the eager, young, and ill-at-ease interne from the hospital that her ancestors had created and supported. She found herself amused at his uncertainty, and then she found within herself a sort of voracious tenderness.

I could eat him, she thought.

And as a matter of fact, after the dance this is precisely what she proceeded to do.

It was the usual country-club dance; that is, it was on three levels. The first, if not necessarily the most popular, was the dance floor itself, the *raison d'être* for the gathering. The second was the bar. And the third was the stag crap game downstairs in the locker room. Hal stayed mostly with the dancers, and mostly he danced with Marcia. The ballroom, the lounge by day, had been rendered forlornly festive by the hanging of a couple of dozen Japanese lanterns; the music was the sleepy kind, and the atmosphere was heavy with the seductive scent of perfumed and heated bodies. Marcia's own perfume was exotic and expensive; it suited her dark, feral beauty; it was oppressive but hypnotic. She wore a spray of diamonds in her hair, and her white shoulders floated invitingly over her low-cut silver dress.

They were dancing now—it was a little after one o'clock—and she half yawned.

"I have the convertible," she said. "Take me home. The others all have cars or lifts." Hal was tired and happy to go. Besides, he had no choice; Marcia had not so much requested as ordered.

Her car was a special Chrysler, with push-button drive; it practically drove itself. Marcia slid down beside Hal, who was at the wheel, rested her head languorously against the back of the seat, and sleepily murmured directions as Hal quietly threaded their way along white sandy roads in the still, moonlit countryside that smelled of salt and of fresh, watered grass. The muffled boom of a wave pounding the beach occasionally jarred the air. It was a beautiful night.

Marcia's house was a large rambling affair (the kind of which it is said, "Nobody can afford a place like that anymore"), built by the dunes and having its own private strip of beach. Here every summer Marcia's father took

his ease and every summer said that they must sell it, it was too big, too difficult to run. But that decision was one that Simon Olmsted, never a procrastinator in other matters, always put off. He had been happy here with his wife when she had been alive, and here he had been happy watching Marcia grow into the wilful, beautiful creature she had become.

The house's weatherbeaten and salt-sprayed shingles were silver in the moonlight as Marcia and Hal drove up the graveled private road. They entered the hall together, and he stood for a moment uncertainly, looking at her as if seeking a clue. The hall traversed the house, in effect cutting it in two. To the right was the dining room and then the pantry, kitchen, and servants' quarters. To the left was a large informal living room, with a picture window giving on the sea and a fireplace so huge a man could stand in it. The hall was terminated at the sea side of the house by a pair of French doors giving onto a lawn.

Marcia smiled at Hal, almost sadly and as if she could read the conflicting emotions in his mind.

"Go to your room," she said, "and get into some slacks and sneakers. I want to walk on the beach."

He did as he was told. When he returned to the hall, lit by a single table lamp only, she was already waiting for him, dressed more or less in the costume she had ordered for him: beige slacks, a tight short-sleeved black jersey, rope-soled *espadrilles*. In her left hand she carried a flashlight.

"Come with me. We'll get the cigarette smoke out of our lungs."

She led the way down the hall and out onto the lawn, so brilliantly splashed with moonlight as to render the flashlight unnecessary. There was white-painted furniture about: chairs, round tables, benches. It was here that Mr.

Olmsted liked to sit these days with a book (biographies, mostly) when he wasn't playing an idle and noncompetitive nine holes of golf. Nine he found a sufficiency nowadays. Here, too, cocktails were served punctually at twelve forty-five and seven fifteen. The lawn was halted abruptly by a deep declivity down to the beach below, and Marcia led Hal to a rickety wooden staircase down to the sand. They walked separately, though side by side, along the water's edge, keeping on the dry sand, just beyond the ever-reaching grasp of the spent and hissing waves that slid back and forth in a monotonous but wayward rhythm.

They walked thus, perhaps a quarter of a mile, and then Marcia, suddenly and still without a word, turned away from the sea and sat at the foot of a dune, resting her back against it and patting the sand beside her to indicate that Hal should sit beside her. Again he obeyed, then waited alongside her, breathless and expectant. The night was pleasantly cool, but the sand retained the warmth of the day's sun. Marcia picked up handfuls of it, letting the hot, dry grains trickle between her fingers. The very noises of the night—the plash of the waves, an occasional whisper of wind—seemed to accentuate the silence about them, a silence that was vibrant, exciting, and disturbing. They could have been the only two persons in the world.

Then Marcia stirred restlessly and, still without a word, put her arms around his neck, drew him down to her, and kissed him hotly and passionately. The night and the waves had been placid only a moment before, but now Hal saw stars shooting in the sky, felt thunderous surf pounding in his ears. Marcia, by an extreme exercise of will, kept control of herself, but what she had thought at her dinner party she said to herself again, I could eat him.

But another cautionary thought came to her, But not now. And as Hal's ardor increased, she said it aloud, "Not now, not now," and gently she disengaged herself from his eager arms and stared at him solemnly and hungrily.

"I wanted to kiss you from the first time I saw you, I think," she said. "I am glad I did." They were the first words, except for the brief admonition of a moment before, that she had spoken since they had walked onto the beach.

Hal, still shaken, felt he had to answer but could come up with nothing better than "I'm glad, too," and then, more in control, laughed derisively at his triteness. She laughed at him. Upon them now fell a quiet, warm sense of intimacy.

This was what Marcia desired, for now.

She was greatly attracted to this good-looking and bright young man, with his flashing, yet somehow shy eyes, his curly hair almost as dark as her own, his strong hands and well-developed shoulders, which are always the mark of a surgeon. He was the kind of person she liked to have around her; he was the kind of person she wanted to marry. He was, she mused, as they stared at one another appraisingly (he was holding her hand, but quietly, almost fraternally), the *kind* of person she wished to marry, not necessarily the exact one. She sensed in Hal a certain innocence, and with it, she recognized in herself a greater experience, a more certain intuition about the play between personalities and the sexes. She felt that if she wanted to, she could get Hal to marry her. But she must not be precipitate; impulsive she could be, but not to this degree. She reminded herself that after all she had known him but this one evening; whence issued this feeling of closeness and understanding? Whatever was to happen, she must wait. For her good and his good, they must wait.

"Hal, dear," she said softly, "I want to know a lot about you, all about you. And I'd like you to know about me.

"We'll see more of one another, won't we? You want us to, don't you?"

"You know I do, Marcia," Hal said, and Marcia did know—for the present at least.

"But it's late now, Hal. Let's go back to the house."

She stood, brushed the sand from her slacks, and hand in hand they retraced their way on the beach, climbed the creaky dune steps, and stood once more in the hall. "Good night, my dear, my very dear," she said, and brushed his cheek with her lips. She walked swiftly up the stairs without turning back, and disappeared.

The next day was blindingly sunny and so still that a man walking seemed to make his own breeze. The sea was flat as a lake; at its rim a narrow edge of white foam quivered with the pulse of the tide, but the very movement seemed motionless. Marcia had learned that Hal was expected to report back to the hospital at one o'clock that afternoon. She drove him into town, a turquoise scarf binding her hair and a song on her lips. She wasn't sure of what was happening, but she knew it to be adventure and she welcomed it as, with a sort of reasoned reservation, she greeted all new experience. Hal was wary and eager; everything had been too sudden for him. He wanted time; he did not want to be engulfed so very quickly and overwhelmingly; he wanted time, time. Marcia wanted it, too.

She wanted time and she wanted Hal, she wanted Hal and she wanted time. She wanted to be absolutely sure of Hal, so that time could not hurt her. So, deliberately and without knowing what she truly felt for Hal, she proceeded to snare him. She had to hold him, she told

herself, until she knew. She was quite certain that Hal would not know what to do. She knew without a shadow of doubt that although Hal would be immovable, certain, and correct in a decision concerning an operation, he would vacillate in a decision concerning a personal relationship. To put it in its most vulgar terms, Marcia was keeping Hal on ice. To put it in a more generous cadre, she was trying to see that nobody got hurt.

The next few months were swift ones for Hal. He was a man in an amusement park shooting down a slide, unable to stop and exhilarated a little too much. He knew he should take time to think, but time rarely was at hand. Marcia bewildered him with a profusion and variety of "larks," as she was likely to call them. On a sunny day off for Hal she would drive him to the Bronx Zoo, where they strolled hand in hand like any pair of young lovers. Or he would find himself at a dinner party where the silken aura of wealth floated deliciously over each jeweled woman, where the conservative evening clothes of the men virtually shouted they had been made in England. Or after the theatrical season opened she would take him to first nights, always on tickets "given me by a friend who's in the play," and Hal, with his quick and retentive mind, soon began to recognize the familiar faces that showed up for these occasions and was amused by the games their possessors played—like the contest between a well-known theatrical agent and the critic of a morning newspaper as to which one could contrive to be the last person seated before the curtain's rise.

It should be noted that the diversions provided by Marcia never cost Hal money of any consequence. Hal would pay for the hot dogs at the zoo, but the dinner parties were always at somebody's home, not at a restaurant, where Hal might have been embarrassed by trying

to pay his share; the theater tickets were always a gift to Marcia, or so she said. But Marcia, with her convertible, her clothes, and her father's town house, could hardly disguise the fact that she was rich.

The dilemma (strangely not unlike the one that was shortly to confront Althea Jones) facing the young doctor was a familiar one, familiar since civilization was first recorded: should a poor boy marry a rich girl? There were many ways of handling this problem, including of course a dowry which was something Simon Olmsted, Marcia's father, somewhat reluctantly believed in. In general, boys in America did not like the idea, because it indicated too great a dependence upon their wife, but few could be found who would not state that the situation had its attractive aspects.

Hal, finally—at least he thought it was finally—examined the problem, sitting on the edge of his cotlike bed in the small walk-up flat he had rented. He tried to make a mathematical balance sheet for it. On the plus side there was Marcia herself. Surely this was a plus to outbalance much, and surely he had never desired a girl more than her. On the debit side: was it desire—or was it truly love?

Also on the plus side was Marcia's wealth. Or, actually, should this be called a debit? It was not an easy question. There was the ironic fact that her family was among the chief contributors to the hospital to which he was attached. Thus he brought himself to the question *What would people think?* Would they say he married only for advancement? But should he let the prospect of such gossip, inescapable always, bother him? If truly he married, if truly he loved, what could it matter? In the last analysis, in the "light of the eternal verities," what could it matter?

Thus Hal began to worry himself, to fight himself. And

all the time he never knew if indeed Marcia wished to marry him, though it did seem so. Somehow although in other matters he was a positive factor, he felt the decision about their future was going to come from her. Sitting on his bed in his rather shabby flat, fresh from a drawing room to which society editors would have paid for admittance, Hal tried to weigh the pros and cons. Very probably he should have heard what a young nurse was to say a year or so later to a rich young man: "If there is the slightest shadow of doubt . . . the answer must be no." That advice was not given him; Hal, happily and miserably, mixed his credits and debits. He wasn't sure what he should do, and like many a soul before him, he waited for a sign. No answer, no sign, came to his little room.

His work, oddly, did not suffer. This, upon examination, was understandable. Hal was utterly dedicated to his calling, and it would have taken a great deal of persuasion to woo him from that devotion. Marcia knew how to apply persuasion, but Marcia also, in her own way, was dedicated to medicine and surgery. She had inherited her parents' concern for the Hospital; she wanted Hal, about whom she felt possessive and therefore proud, to be a credit to the Hospital (and also to herself?). She never attempted to lure Hal away from work. She never kept him up late. She took him often to the theater (it was an important interest to her), but almost always to opening nights. Because of the deadlines of newspaper critics, these performances usually began at eight o'clock or even before, so that Hal was home by eleven at the latest. His hours in those days were fairly regular. Such hours as he had off, Marcia assiduously claimed. But never a working hour.

In fairness to Marcia, her role in this romance—perhaps *courtship* is a better word—should be examined. Marcia, after a period of honest and not selfish indecision,

had decided to marry Hal. That she might possibly not have her way did not occur to her. Marcia was not soulless and conniving, but fundamentally she was incapable of love. She was fond of Hal, she would fight for him; she was sure that marriage to her would be good for him. But of herself she could not completely give. Hal, indeed any husband of Marcia's, must be an ornament to Marcia, a grace note to the melody of her life. She was hopelessly self-centered. It was strictly in character that the first night she had met Hal, when she had taken him walking along the beach, she had thought she must not be precipitate; she had thought, for her good and his good, they must wait. Not *his* good first; hers came first. Marcia could no more escape this pattern of thinking than she could escape her own beauty and desirability. Of a husband she wanted children and companionability; passion she could sometimes give him but not love, for love had been denied her to give.

So Marcia, certain that what she was doing was for the best for Hal and herself (she saw Hal as head of his department at the Hospital—and this indeed he was to become, and she saw an important and wealthy practice of his own, drawn largely from the friends to whom she was introducing him—and this, too, was to come about), began angling as would an expert fisherman. She teased him; she was distant one day, close the next. Never did she let him feel he was being pushed. She recognized, rather she anticipated the conflicts in his mind and the obstacles to their union. She didn't try to remove the obstacles at one swoop; she whittled away at them. In fact she found herself putting off the kill—she was sure the kill would be hers—for the very sensuous pleasure of the chase itself. In this pursuit she was not unlike the father who had sired her.

"You intend marrying that young man, I suppose," her father said one evening.

They were sitting in the library of the town house. Dark mahogany bookcases reached to the ceiling, framing the casement windows that gave onto the marble court, which was fronted by the music room at the other end of the house, framing also a fireplace in which no fire burned, although it was late in September and the Long Island house where Marcia's idyl had begun was now closed.

"Yes, Papa. I think I will."

There was complete understanding and trust between these two. Her answer hung in the dark, still air until he continued quietly:

"You'll be very rich, you know. You *are* rich. And he hasn't a cent. It could be very unwise. It could ruin his career, and they tell me he's headed for a good one."

"It doesn't have to, does it?" she asked almost absently, for she knew they were playing a game. Her father was not going to object seriously; she was not going to change her mind.

She tried a small joke. "Anyhow, it's always in the papers that you should share the wealth."

Her father did not think the joke funny enough and did not answer.

He was Simon Olmsted, financier and tax-deductible philanthropist. In his youth he had been swift and ruthless. His stock manipulations had undoubtedly enriched him at the expense of others (but what enrichments do not?), and the anticapitalist press always honored him as among those who "stole from the widows and orphans." He was a rigidly honest man; he felt that the business of living was the business of fighting, and while he never

gave quarter, neither did he ask for it. Now he was retired, a benign widower who looked something like the late Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. There was still plenty of steel in him, but there was also the familiar and treasured weak spot, which was Marcia.

If she had said, "Papa, I like the Empire State Building. Will you buy it for me?" he would have looked into it seriously, and it would have given him deep pleasure to turn over the deed to her (he would also have reasoned that it was not a bad investment).

Such a man was Simon Olmsted, who now with deceptive casualness was saying, "It can cause a good deal of embarrassment to a poor young man to be married to an heiress. But I have thought of a solution.

"A friend of mine did this with *his* son-in-law, and it worked very well. It is very simple and is not embarrassing. This is it: I could settle some money on him now.

"Now, wait," he ordered, as Marcia started to protest. "I am always giving money to the Hospital. Giving some to make the life of an interne easier is just an extension of that giving. It is helping the Hospital; it is not charity to your Hal. I could explain that to him.

"I could tell him, and it would be true, that it would give me peace of mind to feel that my son-in-law was not bothering about dependency on his wife, but was concentrating freely and easily on the success of his work. Which success, in turn, would insure a happy married life."

If this were an ordered universe, if people behaved logically, Simon Olmsted's suggestions would have been sensible. But even though he made the offer he was reasonably sure Marcia would reject it. Which she did, not from outrage but from a reasoning and cold weighing of the proposal.

"No, Papa, please don't offer it. He would never take

it. Or let us say he might take it, you might persuade him. But I don't like the risk. It is too much like being bought. A man should feel he has some freedom of choice in choosing a bride.

"I am very serious, Papa," she went on. "I would like whatever benefits we can give him, you and I, to be sort of hidden benefits, like hidden taxes. For instance, all my friends he has been meeting—sooner or later they will form the base of his private practice, but he doesn't know that and when it happens he won't think of my hand in it; he'll never think that even before he ever proposed I had planned that far ahead.

"This house, for instance. You have promised it to me as a wedding present, since it is too large for you alone. He may think it too grand, but I can make him see that it comes with me, like a wardrobe, say.

"The time has passed—it went out with Horatio Alger probably—when women had to live on what their husbands made. I can make him see that, too.

"No, Papa, let me do it my way. I will bring him children and happiness."

And so the campaign, now with parental blessing, became official.

If the status of the campaign had changed, the method had not. Hal was as if mesmerized by Marcia; slowly but surely he felt himself drifting into a marriage he did not completely want. Much as he desired her, much as he was bedazzled by her company, there still remained nagging doubts. But Marcia's presence dispelled them; it was only in the stillnesses of his solitary nights that he wondered at his wisdom. But Marcia knew how to tempt, and finally Hal convinced himself he had been seeing ghosts of his

own summoning and that his and Marcia's happiness lay together. He proposed.

A winter had come and gone since first they had met and she had taken him strolling along the moonlit beach. Now they were back at the rambling old house, sitting on the lawn, alone with their thoughts and their cocktails.

"Marcia," he said very calmly, almost casually, but in that very moment Marcia knew what was coming. "Will you marry me?"

After all the thinking he had devoted to the subject, the question sounded almost anticlimactic, and Hal smiled a thin smile.

In answer, Marcia came to him and kissed him fully, voluptuously, on the mouth. He held her closely; doubts and fears tumbled away.

"I thought you'd never ask."

"Darling, I guess you know what was bothering me. Your money, your family influence at the Hospital, all of that. But you made me believe . . ."

"I didn't make you believe anything. I made you see a few things that you, in many ways a darling innocent, could not see. You know, dear, we are well into the second half of the twentieth century. Our standards are realistic. I'd like you to marry me rich or poor, but if I have money that's all to the good for both of us. Anyhow, you'll soon have plenty of your own. I am marrying a doctor who is going to be successful."

The wedding, at Hal's request, was kept small. Mr. Olmsted gave a reception at the town house afterward, to which were invited about fifty friends and relatives. There were the usual accouterments of fashionable weddings: the champagne from France, the caviar, fresh *and* pressed. Everybody knew that a successful wedding had been ac-

complished; everybody was certain that a successful marriage was to follow.

There was a minimum of speeches, but two were interesting and seemed to set the tone for the years that were to follow. One, by Mr. Olmsted, announced that he was deeding the house to the young couple and that they would take up residence there in about a month. The other, by Hal's best man, also a young doctor at the Hospital, said that he had been authorized by Dr. Folsom, chief of Head and Neck at the Hospital, to announce that after the brief honeymoon Dr. Hal was to work with him as an assistant. This was a strong indication, if not an assurance, that Folsom, one of the patriarchs of the Hospital, had chosen Hal as his successor. There were of course those who would say that Dr. Folsom's decision had been influenced by the Hospital's Board of Directors, which, not unmindful of the Olmsted family's past benefactions, always looked forward to some in the future. But this was unfair to Dr. Folsom. He was not one to be bought. Hal, all on his own, was to have a brilliant career in surgery. He was not to be so lucky in his career with Marcia.

It is a painful thing and indeed a difficult thing to trace the deterioration of a marriage. What is the external evidence? Not a temper-losing quarrel, not a big scene, such as is beloved by romantic dramatists. Rather it is the accumulation and the repetition of a thousand tiny incidents, myriad and "many as the sand which is by the sea in multitude." That quotation is from I Kings, and another from that same book has pertinence here: "There ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand."

Though Marcia had lulled or anesthetized Hal's doubts concerning their marriage, they did remain with him. His

shadow of doubt was at first no more than a cloud that could be hidden by a hand—Marcia's hand. But the cloud grew; the heavens were darkened. Hal should have heeded his inner voices; that he did not do so was the result of a weakness bred of youth and desire and inexperience, a weakness cleverly exploited—that is not too strong a word—by Marcia. Headstrong Marcia had to have her way; once she had it she thought she could make everything come out all right. That was her pathetic mistake. She intended nothing but good for Hal, but she refused to face the fact that the best good would have been to leave him alone. She had been able to bring him to the altar, but she could not force the reconciliation of two fundamentally opposed natures.

What Marcia wanted was a society doctor, an ornament to her drawing room. Hal summed it up in quiet bitterness a year and a half after their wedding when he said:

"You should have married an administrator—not a surgeon. An emergency to you is nothing more than something that makes me late for dinner. It is an irritation to you, almost an insult."

Marcia did not answer. Hal was right.

But what to do? Neither Marcia nor Hal had Joe Saylor's attitude toward divorce. Marcia would not let Hal go, as a matter of pride. Her intimate friends, and through them her society-at-large, well knew that she had set her cap for Hal. To break up the marriage would be an intolerable admission of error; to have Hal leave her for another woman would be too great a humiliation. As for Hal, he remembered a story his father had told him, years ago in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania. It concerned Abraham Lincoln, whose marital life had been far from easy. But he is reported to have said, "If you make a bad bargain, hug it the tighter." Hal felt he had made a bad bargain but he

was going to stay with it, and if Marcia wanted no divorce he would not agitate for it.

So these two, a scant couple of years after their marriage, lived in loneliness, with Marcia pounding away at the piano in the music room of the town house in Manhattan. Marcia, who had said, "I will bring him children and happiness." Poor Marcia, who could do neither.

CHAPTER 3

ALTHEA, a mile geographically from where Marcia was playing her piano and more than that in the artificial distances that separate New York society, was sitting on a couch in her basement apartment and weeping.

The couch was covered with a crazy quilt made by her grandmother from odds and ends of material. The quilt was sweet and simple and naïve. It had been made in pleasant humor, in idle and sunny days. "Here is something I made," her grandmother had said, giving it to her mother. "You'll find some use for it some time. . . . And now I must tend to that pesky dog. You know she's having pups again?"

Pesky was a word in those days, and dogs were wayward and had pups. Althea had been born on a farm in upstate New York, and these were the ways of the farm. The family lived frugally and loyally. They would have seemed to a city dweller somewhat impoverished; actually

they were solvent if not almost rich. When Althea was old enough to state that her desire was to be a nurse—a desire natural to a girl who had lived close to life and death, as one does on a farm—there was plenty of money to send her to school and college for training. It was, however, her grandparents who paid her way. Her father, with a sudden, sulky realization that there was "more money to be made in the city"—that sad, disillusioning phrase—had taken Althea, still in her teens, and her mother to New York City, there to become a "prince of finance." Instead he ended his ineffectual days as a small accountant, his wife dying in calm submission to a whim she did not understand, and Althea studying her lessons and learning her profession with the help of grandparents who would give her anything but her father as little as possible.

For Althea, as she sat on her couch, weeping, it had not truly been a bitter life. Her mother had been a vague wisp, her father was something of a foolish alcoholic, but she had been cared for, loved, and she had become a nurse, a good one, and self-supporting, as she still had to remind her grandfather, who frequently sent her solicitous letters and all his dividend checks.

Some of these checks she accepted, others she returned, but they were a root to her in life and she cherished them. Althea, although now she knew the city and could grace the most exquisite of restaurants on the arm of Joe Saylor, felt that the farm of her childhood—the fields of wheat that in the sunlight and wind looked like a waving sea of gold, the velvet eyes of cattle and the blocks of salt licks, the broken sticks and graying bricks that once had been red, all the things that are an upstate New York farm—these were Althea.

Who, in a cool, imperturbable (one would have said), and impeccable (everyone would have said) way, was

not a farm girl but one of the beauties of New York.

Who was sitting on a crazy quilt and crying. Crying for herself and decision.

Sitting on a couch covered by a crazy quilt that might indeed epitomize her dilemma. For the quilt might mean a homespun and an easy, uncomplicated life. But it might also—like the Grandma Moses paintings that had suddenly become the darlings of the saloons of the upper East Side—be a symbol of meretricious chic. Let Joe Saylor use that quilt as a background for one of the silvery carnations with which he decorated the advertising pages of certain magazines, and it would suddenly cease to be a homely, wholesome thing; it would be a fad. The thing to do.

And yet, she realized, for she knew what a man of direction must do, there was nothing tawdry in this, nothing reprehensible. A glittery cheapness may be the goal, but the approach to it may be an honest avenue.

So Althea, unhappy and irritated with herself for so doing, cried.

Cried because she wanted Joe.

Cried because she did not.

Cried in a New York City flat on a farm-made quilt.

Ruth Bellamy was Althea's best friend at the hospital. Their friendship, strangely, was based not on intimacy but rather on intuition. Althea, surely more poised and experienced than Ruth, accepted her as a good friend, for Ruth obviously could be no other thing. Ruth wanted Althea as a friend because she was somewhat dazzled by her and envied her. While, therefore, there was not a complete link between these two, there was a warmth, even a dependence. It was not out of character for Althea to think of Ruth Bellamy at this moment of her life. Joe had said, "Why don't you take a little time off and think it out?"

and Althea thought it a good idea to take his advice in this instance. She didn't want to go to her grandparents, for questions would be asked and she was in no mood to answer them or to face the embarrassment of refusing the answer. Ruth represented simplicity to her, and at this point of complication that is what she desired. A friend had lent Ruth a place in Mt. Kisco, which she shared with a sister. Perhaps there would be a room for Althea for a few days. Althea wanted to do some solitary thinking, but she also was in need of companionship. She didn't want to be alone in a hotel. She called Ruth, who was at the country number.

"It's Althea, Ruth. Listen, dear, I want to get out of the city a few days—a week at the most. I wondered if you had a room up there I could use. Of course you'll tell me if it's inconvenient. . . . There're loads of places I can go. . . ."

"Althea, darling"—Ruth was laughing excitedly—"I've always wanted to ask you here. C'mon up any time. Say when."

Ruth's diction, which betrayed a lack of formal education, was one of her charms. It added to her aura of sincerity, which Althea recognized so keenly and wanted to feel now.

"And you've never met my sister, Betty, and I've been wanting you two to get together. This is great."

"I knew you'd say that, Ruth, dear. Let's make it some time next week if it's all right with you. I have to get permission from Dr. Mike, but I'm pretty sure he'll give it to me."

"Okay, Althea, any time, any time."

"Good-by, Ruth, and thank you. I'll see you at the hospital."

"Now, don't expect anything grand."

"Oh, no, Ruth, I won't."

Ruth hung up the telephone slowly. Her face had lost its smile and animation.

"You heard?" she said to her sister.

Betty answered, "Of course."

"It will be no trouble. She'll only be a week at the most. You'll come in with me, and we'll fix up your room for her. Maybe I should have told her how small it is."

It was two bedrooms, a bathroom between them, a tiny living room, and a larger kitchen-dining room with a good modern electric range and refrigerator. It was a cottage on what is properly called a handkerchief of lawn in a cheaply built but attractive low-income development that had recently sprung up, it seemed overnight, in the very midst of what had formerly been lordly and rather ugly mansions.

"But she won't mind," Ruth went on. "And besides, she sounded sort of desperate. Wonder what's the matter?"

This made her think of herself and Betty, and she said, "I'm going to tell, you know?"

"Oh, yes," said Betty quietly and with little emotion. "I knew. Certainly tell her. You've been wanting to. And I guess we ought to talk to somebody. But it won't do any good."

Twenty-two years ago there occurred in Spain, a country that Ruth had never seen and from which she derived no ancestors, an incident that was to make a profound difference in her life: in the plains southeast of the city of Granada and outside the reddish walls of the famed palace and fortress of the Alhambra, was born Pasquale Mario Jiminez.

He was a small child with even at an early age shifty eyes, and he was born in extreme poverty. His father and mother lived poorly from poor soil; there were a half dozen other children around, and as soon as Pasquale was weaned, it seemed, he started fending for himself. The broken-down hut in which he lived with his brothers and sisters was bad enough, but when Pasquale was eleven years old he learned a significant fact: a few miles beyond a grove of silvery gray olive trees, which unfortunately did not belong to Pasquale's family, he had an uncle, and this uncle, who had never shaved, lived in a cave. Pasquale learned at eleven that his hut, mean though it was, was a better domicile than that of his uncle. There was, then, a difference in ways of living and, Pasquale reasoned, all members of a family need not live alike. Perhaps he, Pasquale, might gain the favor of Franco himself and become rich and clean, for cleanliness was something Pasquale yearned for almost as much as riches, and these two great things seemed forever beyond him. Pasquale, at eleven, knew himself poor and dirty. But he knew also that he had an uncle who was even poorer and dirtier than he.

It was when Pasquale was fourteen that he learned he had another uncle, one who lived in that fabulous country named America. And at the same time Pasquale learned about tourists, many of whom, it turned out, were actually Americans. Pasquale learned many things about America, such as that everybody, even a Pasquale, rode about in motor cars like those the tourists had, and that everybody, even a Pasquale, slept in a bed with a mattress. These and other items he gleaned from the parish priest, who yielded them reluctantly, for Pasquale was never in his favor. So at a comparatively early age Pasquale made up his mind he must go to America. And he realized that to do so he

must make money—money of his own, which he would conceal from his justifiably voracious family. The profits he made from the petty thefts that kept him in the priest's bad graces and the police's wary eyes would not be enough. There was only one good source of revenue open to Pasquale: the tourists. The Americans themselves should pay for his trip to America.

His first step was to spruce himself up as much as possible and apply for a bellhop job at the hotel. But his reputation—even at fourteen he already had one—had preceded him, and he was turned down. He was not disappointed. He had tried because he must leave no stone unturned, but he knew of course that the source of his passage money must be the Alhambra. Who would come to Granada if it were not for the Alhambra, that fantastic stone-lace palace and fortress built by the Moors in the thirteenth century, when they were occupying and embellishing Spain? The "abode of beauty," Washington Irving had called the Alhambra in 1832, but to Pasquale it was the abode of passage money.

The ideal would be to become a guide, but the guides were a closely knit corporation and permitted no outsiders to move in on their means of living. Pasquale, however, attached himself to one of the oldest, ran errands for him, brought him fruit he had filched, and otherwise endeavored to endear himself. In return the old man occasionally gave him a few pennies, taught him some tourist English, and sometimes let him come along when he took visitors through the minareted and filagreed halls. This was precisely what Pasquale wanted. He was becoming a sort of heir-designate of the old man; after a few months, when once the old man was sick with a cold, he handled some tourists alone. He pretended to turn over to his protector all the money he received. He, in turn, gave Pas-

quale a percentage—less than was deserved but sufficient, since he knew as well as did Pasquale that the latter had lied about the money he had received.

Pasquale had always had a smattering of English—it was taught at school—and the tutoring of the old man helped tremendously. He had the guide's patter well memorized: "This is the Sala de las dos Hermanas, in English, the Hall of the Two Sisters. It is called this because of the two very beautiful white marble slabs on the floor, which you see. Above, please look at the roof. Each tiny cell in this roof, which looks like the home of the honey bee, is different. There are more than five thousand of them. . . . This is the palace of Charles the Fifth. It is very ugly. It was built after the Moors were expelled from Spain in 1492. You remember easily that date, *si*? That is the date you were discovered. . . ."

Pasquale made himself useful to tourists in other ways. He was ready with all kinds of information, and he let it be known—altering his manner according to who was his interlocutor—that he was willing to run errands, *any* errands. By the time Pasquale was seventeen, he was sneaky, cynical, and developing a cruel, sadistic character. He had had several brushes with the police and was becoming the shame of his family. He also had hidden, in convertible currency, approximately a hundred and fifty dollars.

Pasquale had confided his ambitions to no one, but he did pester his family for information about the American uncle. All he ever heard was "He is no good," and his mother would say, "He is not a good man, and God protect us, you become not like him. Why are you so bad?" Alas, all this served to do was establish in Pasquale's mind a spiritual as well as corporeal kinship between himself and the mysterious uncle.

Then one day a letter came from America. Mama Jiminez opened the letter before the round and wondering eyes of her family. She drew from it a bill, a one-hundred-dollar bill! No one in this branch of the Jiminez family had ever seen a hundred-dollar bill, but they were quick to figure out what it was. Then Mama did an unexpected thing. She spat upon the bill, then tucked it into her bosom, bolted out of the hut, and ran as fast as her aging but sturdy peasant legs could carry her toward the house of the priest. It was fortunate for her mission that he was coincidentally coming toward their home on his semi-monthly visit, for her family, like a pack in full cry, had rallied behind her, intent on getting that bill before she did God knows what with it.

"Take it," she gasped to the priest. "It is from my brother, the evil one who lives in America. We will not take it, but I will tell him I gave it to you and that you will pray for his soul."

The bewildered priest took the bill and then patiently paid heed to the violent objections of the Jiminezes who had caught up with them. No inquisitor could have thought of more cunning arguments to prove Mama's was an act of folly and the bill should be returned to the family, which rightfully owned it. But the priest, not unexpectedly, ruled in favor of Mama. The letter had been addressed to her; therefore it was her right to use the bill as she chose. Besides, it would be bad for the Jiminez family to use tainted money; the Church, on the other hand, could accept it without fear of contamination. And the Church would not forget the generous thought and deed of Mama Jiminez.

It was a day of glory for Mama Jiminez, a day of anger for Papa Jiminez, and a great day for Pasquale, for he re-

trieved the envelope from America and now had his uncle's address.

Probably the high point in what was to be the short career of Pasquale Jiminez was reached when he wrote his admirable letter of application for a job to his uncle. Knowing he was writing to a crook at the very least, he suavely explained,

> Dear Uncle,
>
> I am your nephew Pasquale, son of your sister. I am almost eighteen, in good health, but not happy. The people here in Granada do not seem to like me, particularly the police, and I have been in jail two times [this was untrue]. I would like to work for you. I have made and saved $150 American and with this I could get to America, but perhaps you would care to send me a little more and I could repay you in wages. You need not fear about me, for I am smart—else, would I have $150? I need a letter from you saying you want me to come and will take care of me . . . .

The letter worked like a charm. The uncle answered immediately, sending another bill. There were more arguments in the Jiminez family and much indignation when it became known Pasquale had hidden funds, but finally it was decided to let him go. He seemed destined to go to the devil, anyway, so he might as well do so in New York. Besides, there would be one less mouth to feed. Within six weeks Pasquale was on his way. Thus was born a petty gangster, a dope addict, and a killer who was himself killed.

There was something interesting in the way Pasquale, amid the great poverty that was his family's, was able

to collect money and steal and connive to reach his goal of entry into the United States. Here was deceit, the knowledge of unknowable matters that could be changed into money, a little wicked world run by a little wicked boy. In Granada or elsewhere in Spain, Pasquale very likely could have become the proverbial big frog in the pond—in his case, the cesspool. But New York was too much for him. It killed him and never knew it. And when he died, there was none to mourn him. Pasquale, who in New York suffered the overwhelming indignity of being called "Shorty," was never missed. He should have stayed in Granada.

The man who killed Pasquale was Peter Innes, a cop. He was twenty-one years old, just like Pasquale.

It was through Pasquale that Ruth Bellamy met Pete. So maybe Pasquale did some good after all. Mama Jiminez would have liked to know about it. But nobody told her.

The education was swift.

Pasquale's uncle was a minor but trusted lieutenant in a gang that dabbled in almost any kind of crime, but generally in those revolving around narcotics. The gang was not important in New York's hierarchy of crime, but it was looked upon with favor by its superiors as a sort of reliable odd-jobs man and it was known that promotion into the big time could come to a man who conducted himself well here. Pasquale's uncle had hopes for such promotion, and bringing his nephew to New York was designed to foster them: if Pasquale turned out to be a bright and good boy, it would redound to his uncle's credit; if Pasquale washed out, he would get lost somewhere and no harm done. Pasquale, during his apprenticeship, would not be in a position to do damage to the

gang or give police any information they did not already have.

Pasquale's first job was that of messenger boy; in that way he was supposed to familiarize himself with the city. He delivered oral messages, then graduated to carrying small sums of money from one point to another, and within a year had proved himself clever and shifty enough to be entrusted with packets of dope. It looked as if Pasquale was to have a bright future, and presently he was making direct contact with the victims of the dope ring and even trying a little "pushing"—the horrible practice of seducing youngsters into the narcotics habit—on his own. But Pasquale was not so smart as he seemed. He began to sample his own wares.

Taking dope at first was a soothing and sometimes exhilarating experience. It was one he shared with a girl he had picked up at a neighborhood dance. (His uncle had installed him in a mean little room in a slum uptown. "When you prove yourself," his uncle said, "we will do better." Pasquale was on salary, just as if he were employed by a legitimate business.) But the sadistic streak he had manifested in Granada became evident and was most pronounced when he was drugged. One night he took a razor to his girl and slashed her badly.

When his uncle heard of the incident he summoned Pasquale to his flat, a three-room walk-up in the West Fifties. (He could afford better quarters, but he was saving his money. He had his eye on a house in Deal, New Jersey, and wanted to buy it when his expected promotion came.)

Pasquale, jittery, walked into the musty parlor. His uncle, a powerful, swarthy man who towered above him, stared at him in silent contempt.

"You little fool," he said, and slapped him so hard and unexpectedly that Pasquale was knocked down.

He kicked him in the buttocks. "You get off that dope or I'll ship you back to Spain. Or maybe lose you in the river. It would be cheaper."

Pasquale, still lying on the floor, his eyes two little dots of venom, answered, "Uncle, never, *never* hit me again."

For answer, his uncle stooped over and slapped him once more.

"Get out now, you punk, and if you don't behave, watch out. We've got no room for junkies in this organization."

Pasquale scrambled to his feet and bolted out the door. It was a Sunday morning.

The police had a record on Pasquale, but it was a relatively minor one. That afternoon they added murder to it, but they never booked him for it. He wasn't alive to stand trial.

Pasquale took a taxi from his uncle's apartment, sped to his own lodgings, took out a loaded Colt .32 that was hidden under his few shirts, slipped it into the side pocket of his jacket, and started drinking. He needed artificial courage to do what he had to do. The alcohol obligingly supplied it. Sitting alone on his unmade bed, drinking whiskey straight from the bottle, Pasquale deliberately worked himself into a rage. *No Spaniard can be slapped with impunity . . . . His uncle was using him, anyhow . . . . He would shoot him quickly, get away . . . . It would be so quick nobody would get to him . . . but the gang would know. They would know he was no punk but somebody to be reckoned with . . . .*

When Pasquale was sufficiently drunk he walked downstairs, gun in pocket, and made his first mistake. He saw

a neighbor park a two-door job in the deserted Sunday street and walk into a rooming house without taking the keys. When Pasquale walked over to the car, he saw the motor was running; evidently the owner intended being away only a few moments. Pasquale hopped into the car and sped off. He would leave it in front of his uncle's place, do his job, get back into the car, drive *leisurely* away, ditch the car (the stolen-car alarm would just have started), and he would be safe. And his girl, loyal despite her slashing, would supply an alibi if needed.

It worked almost as scheduled. He parked the car as planned, walked up the two flights to his uncle's apartment, rang the bell, and when his uncle opened the door, fired three shots at him. With a look of complete incredulity on his face, his uncle crumpled like a tower of sand. Pasquale, smiling triumphantly and humming a nameless tune, ran down the stairs, down the stoop, and headed for the car. There was a policeman idling at the corner. Had Pasquale walked quietly to his car, he would no doubt have got away as planned, but he panicked. Wildly, drunkenly, he fired a shot in the cop's direction, jumped into the car, and careened north. The utterly amazed cop telephoned the alarm, and the chase was on.

A police car picked him up and followed him along the almost deserted Sunday streets to the vicinity of the Hospital. Pasquale swerved into a side street, jumped out of the car, and started running. He saw another policeman walking his beat, and now, quite out of his mind, fired at him. The cop (he was a rookie and his name was Pete Innes) hesitated, then drew his gun and fired one shot. Pasquale dropped.

He was taken to the Hospital's Emergency Ward. Ruth Bellamy was on duty.

There was little to do. Pasquale was dead on arrival.

More police were summoned, and identification was made. This was not difficult, for Pasquale loved licenses, restaurant credit cards, and the like—they seemed to give him a feeling of security—and his pockets were stuffed with them.

One of the police officers said, "Okay, we'll try and find his family. But he's no loss to the city. You know, miss"—he was speaking to Ruth—"the person who really needs attention is sitting over there. I know how he feels. We were all rookies once."

Ruth Bellamy looked at Peter Innes. He was in a corner of the white-glazed-tile antiseptic emergency room. He was sitting on a stool, and he was trembling. He was also close to tears.

Ruth said, "What's your name, Officer?"

Peter said, "I'm not an officer. Nurse, I've never killed anybody. I—" He broke off helplessly. He was a six-foot blond youngster, with wavy blond hair and deep-blue eyes. He looked like a baby and a man, and Ruth could almost physically feel herself falling in love with both.

"You wait here," she said in a maternal yet provocative undertone.

She brought him a cup of coffee into which she had poured some brandy. He drank, he calmed down, and he looked at her in gratefulness. That is how Peter Innes fell in love with Ruth Bellamy and she with him.

Pasquale Jiminez, of Granada, Spain, shot dead at twenty-one in New York City, had brought them together.

Althea sat in her apartment thinking of Ruth, whose invitation to the country she had virtually commanded. Everyone in the Hospital knew the story of Ruth and Pete (it was one of the Hospital's favorite romances), but no one knew why the couple had not long since mar-

ried. A few inquiries from other nurses, though veiled by a jesting tone, had drawn such a cool, uninformative response from Ruth that the subject had become taboo in Ruth's presence. This was unusual, for the nurses were friendly but surely a gossipy lot.

She has her own troubles, I imagine, thought Althea. Wonder if I can help her? It would be something for Althea, the more mature, to do. Viewed selfishly, it would take her mind away from herself. And generously, it would be an act of thanks and friendship.

Althea's apartment was darkening as the evening came on, but she didn't bother to put on the lights. It was the ground floor of a brownstone, what had formerly been the kitchen and the servants' dining room or possibly a laundry. Althea had made the front room her bedroom (she had a daybed), and the rear room was devoted to her books and some framed prints by Grant Wood and Doris Lee. There was also a little yard, and between the living room and the bedroom were a bathroom and a kitchen hardly large enough to accommodate its two-burner gas range. The apartment was painted a darkish green, and as the day grew more somber it began to look dreary and shoddy. Althea was sitting in the front room, for this was where she had the telephone, and a nurse, like a doctor, does not like to be far from that instrument. Althea could have lived in better quarters, but she had found this little place suited to her needs and had never bothered to do much about it. She rarely invited Joe Saylor here, and, as a matter of fact, she didn't have too many friends, for she was by nature aloof. Waiting to be awakened—as Joe would put it.

Waiting in her dark bedroom to be wakened. *Oh, I will paint this place bright as sunlight. Or move. Or marry Joe and be rich and happy. Happy? Or marry somebody*

else. But who? And the image of Dr. Hal Meikeljohn flashed across her mind—to be banished so swiftly that she did not recognize the danger signal.

What she did see and what depressed her most were two dozen beautiful red roses resting, half concealed by wax paper, in the somewhat coffin-shaped box of one of New York's most fashionable florists. When the smartly dressed messenger boy had delivered them, she had known at once from whom they had come. And now as she looked at them their opulent, self-satisfied beauty seemed to mock everything she had been saying to Joe Saylor. Indeed, why remain a minor surgical nurse when possibly she could do so much for the Hospital and the cause to which she was devoted by—retiring? Which meant, in this case, marrying.

How to answer the letter from Joe that accompanied the roses—and even the plea of the roses themselves?

Joe had written simply and to the point—the way he plotted out a drawing for one of his advertisements. Joe had said:

> Althea, I offended you without meaning to and I must explain. You know I want you to marry me and that I think it would make you happy, as I know it would me. I know you possibly better than you know yourself; I know I am not distasteful to you. I think, therefore, our marriage would work.
>
> I know, Althea, that I am often selfish and arrogant. I have been successful, and people come to me; I am out of the habit of going to them. But in your case, dear, I am a mendicant.
>
> When I mentioned divorce I meant only one thing: give me a chance, Althea dear. Let me try to make

you happy as my wife. If I fail, you can leave me. And be as free as when you came to me.

I have assumed (although we have never discussed the subject) that you have no religious scruples against divorce. So far as I am concerned, I wish that you did *and* that you would marry me.

You were not correct when you said I had made a "proposition not a proposal." I was begging you for a chance and asking you to give it to me with a minimum of risk to yourself. I approach you and send you these flowers in love and humility.

Joe

The letter sounded sincere to Althea, but somehow it also sounded tricky. She was not sure, despite all that Joe had said, that she would not be taking more of a chance than Joe. Of this much she was sure: she would not answer Joe now; she would go to Ruth's as soon as she could, tomorrow if possible. On this uneasy and evasive decision she fell into a sleep that was itself uneasy.

Dr. Meikeljohn's office at the Hospital was like almost any other doctor's. On the walls there were diplomas and certificates of honorary degrees (Hal was already getting these) and signed photographs from his teachers. There were also his licenses to practice medicine and surgery. These were someday to be moved to an office downtown, for Hal was preparing to start a private practice, but for the time they, along with some of his medical books and the inevitable magazines, constituted the *décor* of the tiny room that had been assigned to him as office space.

She walked in, by appointment, looking drawn and nervous.

"Sit down, Althea," said Hal, studying her. He called

his nurses by their first name when they were not on duty. "What's the matter?"

"I feel tired, Dr. Mike. [He was generally called that at the Hospital.] I'd like to take a week or two off. I don't have to, you understand, and if you need me—but we're pretty decently staffed just now, and I haven't had a vacation in more than a year and . . ." She stopped, realizing she was rambling.

Hal said, smiling, "Go ahead. I relieve you of all duties as of now. You come back when you feel like it. But keep in touch with me."

"Thank you. I knew you'd say that. I think I'll spend a little while with Nurse Bellamy, and I'll be back no later than two weeks from today. I . . ." There was surely nothing more to be said, yet there was something hanging in the air, waiting to be spoken and declared.

Hal rose and walked around his desk, his hand outstretched, and shook Althea's hand, which was offered almost timidly. He, too, seemed tired but somehow boyish as he looked gently down into her deep, troubled eyes.

"You know, Althea, I am very fond of you and I wish you well. I want you to tell me if there is anything any time I can do for you."

And without a further word, he put his arm around her, drew her close to him, and kissed her long and hotly on the mouth.

She responded as if she had always known this would happen and had always wanted it. Then she fled—it was really fleeing although she walked slowly, controlling every step as would a tightrope walker, on whose life each such step depended. *It was important to walk slowly,* she was thinking. *Nobody must be in a position to say a nurse ran from Dr. Mike's office, and surely nobody must say that nurse was Althea.* So she walked slowly

to the familiar elevator, smiled at the operator, and when the cab deposited her on the ground floor, in a sort of haze found a telephone booth, and after the expenditure of a few exploratory dimes got Ruth Bellamy.

That night she was on her way, by train, to Mt. Kisco. Ruth Bellamy greeted her at the old-fashioned station and marveled at her vague, sweetly distant appearance. Honey, she thought, you may be in a worse way than Sister and me, and she took her home, accepted her apologies for her fatigue, and tucked her into bed after giving her a bowl of soup (nurses always give bowls of soup, even to one another). Althea, exhausted, slept well.

In the Hospital, alone in his office, the reading lamp trained on a photostat of an important *New York Times* medical story, Dr. Meikeljohn tried to read and absently listened to the velvet ringing of his private telephone. The phone, a gift from Marcia, was the one luxury Hal had allowed himself, but nobody had the number except Marcia. This was according to his desire, and he knew what he was doing now when he did not answer. Finally the bell, after one last querulous try, stopped ringing.

Hal, the most proper and brilliant of young surgeons, kept on looking at his newspaper with, to paraphrase a modern poet, "eyes that saw no paper at all." He was at the moment not the wonderful machine of surgery that the Hospital and its staff admired; he was simply a deeply disturbed young man. He was, he thought, in love. And he was married to another girl. It doesn't help to know that such situations have occurred millions of times before. It's only when it happens to you that it counts. Dr. Mike of the Hospital was finding that out. It perplexed him, worried him, and scared him.

Althea, sleeping through her own worries in a friend's house in Mt. Kisco, had made two men, in the space of a few days, feel a humility that was not a grace of their nature but something contrary to it. She, of the beautiful face, who would willingly harm no one, had—by doing nothing—started the wheels of tragedy.

CHAPTER 4

ALTHEA WOKE promptly at six forty-five, as was her custom (she was normally due at the hospital at eight) and was startled and scared and did not at first know where she was. Then memory swept back upon her and she cringed. She did not know what Dr. Mike's kiss meant, but it was unpremeditated—of that she was sure. Unpremeditated, indeed, as was her willing response.

She was here at Ruth's, she thought wryly, because she wanted to think out a problem concerning Joe Saylor and herself. And now? Was she in a triangular situation—or even quadrangular, since Marcia was present, too? Was Dr. Mike's—Hal's—kiss something to be forgotten, an impulse yielded to, an occurrence not to be remembered?

She heard Ruth (who, like her, rose early) moving in the kitchen. She put on a robe and looked at herself in the bedroom mirror. She looked drawn and tired. Even those who worshiped her beauty in the Hospital would have admitted that something was wrong with their god-

dess. She realized it herself, and she opened her door, put on a very false smile as she walked into the kitchen-dining room, and said in embarrassment (something had to be said):

"Hi, Ruth, how are you? I'm afraid—to coin a memorable phrase—you've got a crazy mixed-up nurse on your hands."

"That makes three of us," Ruth answered complacently, "only Betty's not a nurse. She's mixed up, though, so she rates but plenty.

"Tell you what," she went on. She was talking mostly for the sake of talking; Althea's appearance, her aura of nervousness, bothered her. "You tell us your troubles, and we'll fix them up for you. And then we'll tell you ours, and you can fix them up for us. Fair enough? And now all I'm going to do is fix eggs. Boiled okay? Less nuisance."

During this monologue, Betty Schneider, Ruth's sister, had walked into the kitchen. She was a wispy woman with deep, dolorous brown eyes and faded, mousy hair. She could have been no more than thirty-five but looked well into her forties. She was wearing a forlorn pink kimono, faded also but spotlessly clean. Everything about her looked tired and defeated. Althea's heart went out to her. It was easy to see that Ruth had not been exaggerating when she had said they had troubles.

They ate in silence broken occasionally by a desperate effort by Ruth to make some light remark. Eventually she gave up, and in silence complete they cleaned up the dishes. Ruth, in slacks and a bravely flowered shirt, walked to the corner store and bought a *New York Times* and *Daily Mirror*, and they shared the papers, three lonesome girls on a tiny porch of a tiny house in a large development.

For Althea, it was sufficient to sit alone with her thoughts and try to figure a way out of her predicament. She did not feel the need to communicate. But the weight of silence became oppressive and finally unbearable to Ruth, and she blurted out, "Althea, let's clear the air around here or we'll all go crazy. I don't know you too well, but I've felt like you were sort of an older sister, and I'd like to ask your advice. [Actually, Ruth and Althea were the same age, twenty-three.] It really concerns Betty more than me, I guess, but Betty doesn't mind my talking to you about it. Do you, Betty?"

Betty smiled thinly and shook her head.

"Betty doesn't like to talk about it—you'll see why—but she doesn't mind my telling you, do you, Betty?"

Ruth was flustered and both Althea and Betty knew it, but the knowledge did not quench a flame of anger in Betty.

"I've already told you I don't mind. For God's sake, go ahead.

"Though," she said, repeating what she had told her sister, "it won't do any good."

And then, repentant at her outburst, she again smiled her thin, defeated smile and said, "I'm sorry, Ruth, and you, too, Althea. I'm sure you'll be of help to us if only by your friendship. It's only that I get cross sometimes.

"Well," she went on, rising and making what she liked to call one of her "little jokes," "I'll go in and make the beds. I've heard this story before."

The pathetic figure moved vaguely like a ghost to the porch's screen door and disappeared.

Perhaps the most fundamentally sad thing about the story Ruth had to tell was that it was not unusual. But simply because the hopelessness, the despair, had come

to others in similar circumstances did not render them more endurable. Betty and Ruth, ten years her junior, were born in a small industrial town in Massachusetts. It had a variety of industries, but the main support of its economy was the knitting mill. Their father ran and owned a hardware store. In the Thirties, just before Ruth's birth, the knitting mill, faced with the competition of cheap labor in the South, had to close down. The town did not exactly close down with it, but it almost did. Mr. Bellamy's business suffered but not to the point of shutting its doors; people still had need of hardware, and much that in the old days would have been discarded was now being repaired. But the unpaid accounts steadily and alarmingly increased. Mr. Bellamy worried, and took his fears to the local speakeasy—it was 1935—and dispelled them with congenial and also worried friends. The women of the town became convinced that the entire adult male population was turning into a congeries of drunks, and they were partly right. Accordingly and unfortunately, the women became thin-lipped and shrewish. Also accordingly and also unfortunately, the men took to drinking the more. Any outsider could have observed that the town was coming to an end, and it is likely that most of the inhabitants, in the firmly closeted recesses of their mind, knew it also. But towns have a way of hanging grimly onto life. Betty was twenty and Ruth ten the morning their father was found face-down in the mill race. Many of the oldtimers date the end of the town as of that day, but actually Betty managed to keep the hardware store open for another ten years. The place is not a ghost town today. New industries and a new population have moved onto the site. There is hardly anyone left who remembers the community as it was when the knitting mill clicked.

But that is the story of a community, and not what concerned Ruth as she sat sadly on the little porch of the house lent her by a friend and told her story—or rather, Betty's story—to Althea.

When Betty finally closed the hardware store, in 1955, that surely signalized the death of the old town. A new one had grown to take its place, and there were hardly any customers to mourn the passing of the store. Betty left the property in the hands of a real estate agent and two years later was glad to get $2,000 for it, though she had dreamed of $5,000 at least.

There was some question as to whether Mr. Bellamy had committed suicide or had been the victim of an accident. Either was a possibility. What was certain was that the old man had been drunk, for although the speakeasy had been replaced by the saloon the customers remained the same. The insurance company gave the bereaved family the benefit of the doubt. There was very little money involved, since Mr. Bellamy had been borrowing against his policies.

Throughout Ruth's narrative there was very little mention of Mrs. Bellamy, their mother. Indeed, this woman was one of those negative persons destined to remain off-stage. Althea was reminded of her own parents, her unsuccessful father and her mother, who, like Ruth's, remained in a shadowy background. But there was a difference: Althea had always had the security of her grandparents' farm behind her; when the Bellamy business went broke and Mr. Bellamy died there was nothing left.

"Mother was a sweet person," Ruth continued, "but except when father was drunker than usual and she yelled at him, you almost forgot she was around, if you know what I mean. Betty was much more of a mother to me. —Oh, Althea," she exclaimed suddenly, "I don't know

why I'm going into all this past history. Why bore you? Like Betty says, it won't do any good, anyway."

"On the contrary, dear, go on," Althea soothed, "I want to know," and indeed, not only was she interested and concerned for her friend, but she was vaguely conscious that it was doing her good to be thinking of someone else's problems.

"When Father died Mother went into a kind of stupor and Betty had to do everything about the funeral and all the papers to be signed and the insurance and all that. And then one day Mother said she'd had it, that Betty was old enough to take care of me, and that she would not stay another day in the house, and she went off to Braxton, where she had some cousins. She said she'd been kind to them in the past and they would be glad to have her with them now. She couldn't have been more wrong. They took her in, all right, but we have to pay for her keep. It's not much, but it's a lot to us. We fixed it up so Mother doesn't know she's paying rent and board. These cousins have a sort of boardinghouse, but Mother thinks she's there for free and everybody plays the game. That's nice, but gee, if we stopped sending the money, they'd have her out on the street in a minute. That would be just like killing the old lady, and we can't do that. But, Althea, I do sometimes wish she were dead."

Ruth fell silent and then, mumbling about being thirsty, went inside. Althea heard her busy with ice cubes. She looked at the houses of the development. Each was separated from its neighbor by the width of two cars; each was made of identical prefabricated units, though they were jiggled around from house to house to avoid monotony as much as possible. The shutters and doors of each house were painted one of four colors: red, pale blue, yellow, or black. Still, they gave an effect of sameness. She could

see all around her little groups on little porches. Most of the groups contained men; it was Saturday. Soon the men would be off to golf games. It made a pleasant sight, she thought; they all looked like happy families. Yet, had somebody noticed Ruth and Betty and her earlier this morning, would he not have thought that this, too, was a contented gathering? Or would the absence of men have been a giveaway? And, indeed, was Althea herself not wrong in assuming that each porch in the development contained nothing but contentment? Betty, Ruth, and she had no monopoly on trouble. There was plenty to go around, if that was any satisfaction.

Ruth returned with two glasses of iced tea.

"Betty's dozing," she said. "She hasn't been sleeping well. Can't say I blame her.

"Well," she resumed, "if you can take it, here's Chapter Two. . . ."

She broke off impulsively to go over to Althea and give her a hug. "I can't tell you what it means to get this off my chest. I've nobody in the world to talk to but Pete, and somehow it's different with him, and anyhow I don't want to worry him too much.

"Pete is something else again," she mused. "He wants to marry me, as I guess you know, and I want to marry him, too. But just now . . . Well, let me tell you about Mr. Harry Schneider."

After Mrs. Bellamy went off to live on the nonexistent bounty of her cousins, Betty ran the store and cared for Ruth. For the better part of ten years, she scrimped and saved, guarding, as her life, the small inheritance that had come from her father. The insurance money had just about covered the funeral expenses. There were a few bonds left her and Ruth. Betty sold hers when she had to, but she never touched Ruth's, although she could have

legally. One way or another Betty steered Ruth through an education and got her through nursing school. Ruth became an excellent nurse. Betty had discharged her obligation to her kid sister; the day she was graduated Ruth was assured of a job for life. It was otherwise for Betty. She had managed to run her father's store, but that hardly constituted business experience. When *she* had to look for a job, the going was tough.

They were dreary years for Betty, and when she met Harry Schneider (she hardly remembered just where or when, though it was not long ago), the results were pathetically foreseeable. He was even a traveling salesman. Betty, less fascinated than soothed by his easy talk and completely open desires, allowed herself to be seduced almost listlessly. She was lonely—in the dying community of which she was a part there were no unattached males her age—she needed companionship, and got it—on his terms.

Harry Schneider was not a bad man, but certainly he was irresponsible. When he heard Betty was to have a child his first impulse was to run away. Perhaps he did not for the practical consideration that it was so well known that Betty had been "keeping company" with him (and no one else) that there could be little or no doubt as to the child's paternity. Perhaps he was touched by Betty's plight and wanted to give the child a name (it was fortunate, if anything in this affair was indeed fortunate, that he was not married). With what deep humiliation Betty had gone to him, unable, because she had not enough money to escape, to hide the facts from him! With what forlorn shame she had promised to be a good wife to him and even held out the hope that they might find happiness together! Anyway, Harry Schneider and Betty Bellamy were married by a local justice of the peace and set up housekeeping in Betty's old place, "until they could

find something better." The child was born, and Betty hopefully christened him Harry, after his father. The father, however, seemed not to be unduly touched, for six months after his son's birth he disappeared. Perhaps he felt he had fulfilled his obligation to Betty and that was that. Anyhow, Betty made no attempt to find him; she felt that even if she succeeded it would not, as she had said today, do any good. She never heard from him again.

Betty now had an infant son as well as herself to feed. She decided to board the child with an elderly and childless couple whom she knew and go to New York and find a job. For the time being she could live with Ruth. The couple agreed with alacrity to take the child, but they made an unexpected stipulation. They would care for him for two years, and the mother need pay them nothing. If, however, at the end of two years, she was still unable to keep him, she must agree to let them adopt him. Betty, in desperation, signed papers to this effect.

"And the two years are almost up," Ruth said, seeming to drone her melancholy tale. "And no matter how you stretch your imagination I don't see how we can say we are able to take care of that little kid. And he means everything to Betty. She hasn't had much in life. And now she is losing her son."

"What does Betty do?"

"She's a saleslady at—" Ruth named a minor department store. Betty, with her washed-out looks and defeated demeanor, couldn't be expected to get much of a job, Althea reflected. Poor Betty, who had given all her life and saved nothing for herself.

"Althea, please understand, this isn't a pitch to borrow money from you. It's just that you know your way around so much better, I thought maybe you'd have an idea. . . .

Anyhow, it's done me good to talk to you," she finished lamely.

Betty walked onto the porch at this moment, and Althea impulsively rose and kissed her. Betty managed a smile.

"It's a mess for sure, isn't it?" she said. Her eyes glistened, but she kept the tears unshed.

"There must be a way out," Althea soothed, although she was inclined to doubt it. "We'll find it."

They discussed it the rest of that morning, sitting in the summer sunlight on the borrowed porch. But each avenue they explored seemed to culminate in a dead end. The Hospital had a fund to help employees, but both Ruth and Althea doubted it covered a case like this. Betty was not a church member, so help could not come from that source. Any institution would probably decide that the child's future was more assured where he was. Despite their protests, Althea told the sisters she would write her family to see what could be done there. But it was Betty who put her finger on the main point and stumbling block.

"Suppose we could borrow a few thousand dollars. We could probably stave things off for a while. But you know what we need? We need what they call recurrent income. After the couple of thousand are gone, what? You can't keep on borrowing indefinitely. The people Harry is with have a steady income. Any court's got to say he's better off where he is. Oh, my poor baby. . . ." And Betty at last broke down and wept shamelessly.

Somehow, though, as Ruth had hoped, the air was somewhat cleared. On Monday they would all go back to town and see what could be done. Althea with one flat statement had cut her visit short. This actually had not displeased Ruth because although the little house was lent

to her, it did cost a few extra dollars in transportation and this was a time for saving every penny. She had decided, before Althea called, to give it up. If the summer heat of New York were only the worst thing they had to face! Maybe Althea, bringing a fresh point of view to the dilemma, would find a way out of it. Maybe . . . maybe . . .

That night, after supper, the three were sipping coffee when Ruth said, "You know, Betty and I are just about as selfish as they come. I know something's eating you, kid, and we haven't even got around to it. Do you want to tell?"

Althea laughed, really light-heartedly. What these sisters were facing certainly made inconsequential her own concerns.

During the course of Ruth's recital she had not once thought of herself, and now she didn't want to. But Ruth insisted, and she told them briefly about Joe Saylor, his pressure upon her, and her growing conviction that he was not the man for her. She studiously refrained from any mention of Dr. Meikeljohn's kiss, and in the back of her mind she had virtually decided that it simply represented an impulse to which no importance must be attached.

"I feel silly even talking about myself," she said, and meant it. "Let's forget it."

"Listen, honey," Ruth said in her gruff, good-natured way, "picking the wrong guy can lead to just the mess poor Betty's in now. But we can't help you there. You've got to make that decision all alone. Personally, I think he may be a jerk, if I may say so. But if you marry him, I'm going to like him."

Althea laughed merrily.

Later that night she could hear, through the paper-thin walls, the sisters talking in low tones.

"You may think he's a jerk," she heard Betty say, "but I wish she'd marry that rich artist. A guy like that could tide us over and," she went on mistakenly, "to him it would be just an income-tax deduction. But, and I mean this, I wouldn't want her to marry him unless she really wanted him. She's a good girl, that Althea. I'm glad we talked to her, whether anything ever comes of it or not. Just talking to her made me feel better."

Althea felt tears springing in her eyes. She had not thought of Joe in that light. She would talk to him about Betty. He was an artist and sympathetic, and this would be something entirely aside from their personal relationship. She would see him first thing Monday, any time Monday, for technically she was still on leave of absence. Or was she on vacation? Anyway, Joe would understand, and it would have nothing to do with their own problem. . . . Everything would be all right. . . . And Althea, peaceful and hopeful, drowsed off to sleep.

CHAPTER 5

THE THREE GIRLS took a commuters' special Monday morning. The passengers were mostly men, and they behaved as if they were partly in a trance. They lit pipes and cigarettes, leaned against posts, and read newspapers

—you felt that each leaning man had his own post. Everyone had a brief case or *attaché* case. All spoke pleasantly but coolly to one another. Every two or three minutes they glanced at their wrist watch. There was a rumble from around the bend of the tracks and the beep of a whistle. This was the signal. Everybody folded his newspaper, picked up the brief case that had been at his feet, and took a position on the platform—like members of a ballet corps taking positions chalked on the stage floor. The train lumbered in, slowed, and stopped. There was a jam of people at each entrance, but finally everybody got in. Ruth and Althea got seats together, and Betty found one a couple of seats behind. Everybody craned necks to see if the few latecomers who showed up, running, made it or missed it. There was another beep, and the train moved on toward New York. In two places in Althea's car, seats had been turned so as to face one another, and a square board advertising a soft drink and labeled BRIDGE proclaimed that these places were reserved. The players got in, put the board on their knees, and one of the men was shuffling before the train got under way. This was the daily ritual of commuting. Althea wondered if she would like it. She thought not.

Althea took the mail from her box and let herself into her stifling apartment. She threw the letters on a table without even looking at them, so urgent was her need to open windows and try to cool the place. It had been sealed since Friday night when she had gone to Ruth's, and it was now Monday morning. A hot New York weekend can make an oven of an apartment, particularly a basement apartment like Althea's, but what surprised her was that she had been gone so short a time. It seemed weeks, at least. Then she remembered that in a way she

had relived ten or more years in the lives of the Bellamy sisters. And that brought her back to the job she had returned to do. There had been no further mention of it after their talk of Saturday. Althea had kissed the sisters as she left them at Grand Central Station and murmured, "I'll see what I can do." Now was the time to do it.

First, make an appointment with Joe. As she reached for the telephone her eyes fell upon the letters, which she had for the moment forgotten. One was from Joe. Well did she know that scrawly handwriting. How often, in lighter moments, had she told him how lucky it was for him that he could draw better than he could write. She opened it; it was dated Friday.

> Honey [it said], where are you? Tried at the hospital and then at the apartment, but no answer. [She remembered the telephone had rung when she was packing to go to Ruth's and she had not answered it.] Hope you are all right and that you got (I mean *got* not just *received*) my letter. Marcia Meikeljohn, wife of the guy you work for, is giving a party Tuesday night, and I asked could I bring you. She says she knows you slightly and would love to know you better, etc., etc. Please go. It will be fun, and we can talk. She's opening her house in town specially for it. Summer-bachelor-party idea. I miss you and love you.

She found another letter, addressed in a rather florid, feminine hand. It was also dated Friday. Instinctively she knew this was from Marcia. It was.

> Dear Althea Jones [it ran], I invited Joe Saylor to a party I'm giving in town Tuesday, and he said he

had a date with you. I do hope I can prevail upon you to keep it with us. It's short notice, I know, but the party was one of those sudden inspirations. A party for summer bachelors. We girls will be in the great minority, so we ought to have fun.

Hal, who, incidentally, has great respect for you, joins me in hoping we will see you.

There were some puzzling things about these letters. For one, Joe had never told Althea he was a friend of Marcia Meikeljohn's, and this seemed odd in the extreme. For another, *Hal . . . joins me in hoping we will see you.* But Hal knew she was going out of town. And then she realized that Marcia must have written the letter without consulting Hal, that she had gotten her home address from his secretary or Personnel. By now Hal would have told her she was out of town and Joe would have another date. She called Joe.

His ebullient voice answered. "Boy, am I glad to hear from you. You in town? Marcia called me Saturday to say you had gone away. Where did you go? Never mind, tell me tomorrow. You're coming, of course. No, I didn't make another date. Who'd I date but you? Marcia? Just met her. Charmed her at a party a few weeks ago. She collects celebrities, so I rated. Listen, darling, don't say anything. Just be ready. I'll pick you up tomorrow at seven. I've got to fly to Chicago *now*. Flying back first thing tomorrow morning. Simply can't talk any more. See you tomorrow. Be ready at seven. Great fun. Good-by."

Althea had hardly gotten a word in edgewise. This was typical of Joe—sweeping everything before him, never for a moment doubting he would have his way. And of course he was just the type that would charm Marcia.

He hadn't even given Althea time to wonder whether

she should go to the Meikeljohns' party. How would Dr. Mike greet her? What would he think? But she had to see him some time—it couldn't be avoided—and a party might be the easiest way. And also, she wanted to see Joe as soon as possible.

She undressed and took a cold shower. The apartment, which could be said to have cross-ventilation of a sort, with the help of electric fans in the bedroom and living room was becoming cooler. At least, Althea said to herself, it wasn't so hot she couldn't think. She sat down and wrote a note to Marcia. She had returned suddenly, she said, and found Marcia's gracious note. She had spoken to Joe, and he had made no other date; she was delighted to accept. Her salutation was "Dear Mrs. Meikeljohn." She had debated about this for a while. Marcia had written "Dear Althea Jones." But Althea disliked that obvious compromise. It should be "Dear Althea" or "Dear Miss Jones." For her part, since she wouldn't say "Marcia Meikeljohn" and couldn't say "Marcia," it had to be "Mrs. Meikeljohn." She felt a little crowded by this, as if Marcia had somehow outmaneuvered her. She thought she didn't like Mrs. Meikeljohn. And this had nothing to do with that damned kiss she couldn't get out of her mind.

It was now past eleven, and she couldn't be sure her letter would reach Marcia tomorrow morning. She marked it *By Hand,* and giggled a little. The hand would be hers.

She then looked into her savings bankbook and saw she had $2,630.18. She remembered the eighteen cents; it was from a dividend check for $3.18 sent by her grandfather, and represented his share in a hotel in Ohio. How he had ever gotten into that she could not imagine, but it amused her to wonder what part of the hotel her grandfather owned with his share (and someday it would probably be hers). Two thousand six hundred and thirty dollars *and*

eighteen cents. She could lend $2,500 to Betty. Nonrecurrent income, of course.

Next she wrote her family upstate, explaining in full the plight of the Bellamy sisters and asking what money, if any, they could make available.

And now there was nothing to do but wait.

She dressed, walked to a drugstore on Third Avenue, where she had a chopped-egg sandwich and a cup of coffee, then took an uptown bus that brought her near Marcia's house and delivered her letter. She made her way to Fifth Avenue and walked down it, by the green park, the fountain in front of the Plaza, the enticing windows of Bergdorf's (the worldly life), the gray steps of St. Thomas' (the spiritual life), and for repose and pleasure, turned west on Fifty-third Street, toward the Museum of Modern Art. Here, although she preferred the American artists of the Thirties, she always found solace in that fabulous Permanent Collection—the Cézannes, the Van Goghs, the Pissarros, the Picassos (the early ones). . . . And then she sat in the garden over which looms that huge statue by Lachaise: big-buttocked, big-breasted, big-abdomened—the all-woman, earthy, strong, and triumphant. The statue always invigorated Althea. Born on a farm but living in a city, she drew from this fecund statue a feeling of strength, of a return to natural and simple things. She stayed in the garden almost two hours.

It was five o'clock when she returned to her apartment. The telephone was ringing.

Hal Meikeljohn had been unable to get Althea out of his mind all week-end. He had started guiltily when Marcia had mentioned her name at dinner Friday night. It had been an eerie moment; he had been thinking of Althea when suddenly Marcia's voice had broken through his

meditations: "Oh, Hal, Althea Jones, that nurse of yours—I invited her to our party, with Joe Saylor." He had recovered himself and told Marcia that Althea had that very morning applied for and been granted a vacation, that Marcia had better telephone Joe Saylor and tell him to get another girl or come alone. What was Althea doing with a man like Joe Saylor, he wondered. He had just met him, but he had heard about him; he didn't seem to be a person Althea would like. And then Hal had had to remind himself that it was no concern of his whom Althea saw or what she did so long as it did not interfere with her hospital duties. That kiss . . . Well, it was a sudden impulse, most regrettable. Althea, Miss Jones, would understand. But he must speak to her about it.

Marcia's summer-bachelor party was just that; it was a party for the men in town whose wives were summering in the country beyond reach of daily commutation. They had been told to bring their "spare wives." This, as Marcia (who had rather hoped to uncover a few items of gossip) had foreseen, had struck terror in the hearts of a number of the invited. But most of the men were unconcerned, and when the party was finally given the gossip in Marcia had to go undernourished, for not only did Marcia know most of her female guests but there was not one there who, if not actually her escort's wife, was not known to his wife. Oddly, Althea was the only woman to receive an invitation from Marcia (save some personal friends of Marcia's who had received their invitations by telephone). Marcia had had the feeling that, since Althea was only a nurse and furthermore worked for her husband, she would be more at ease if she received a written invitation as well as a message from Joe Saylor. Marcia would have fought to the death anyone who accused her of being a snob, yet

no nurse had ever been invited to her house. Marcia just naturally gravitated to the higher echelons.

She was curious about Althea Jones and was eager to observe her at a Meikeljohn party. She had been struck by her beauty the few times she had seen her at the Hospital, and she imagined it was that which attracted Joe Sayler. But the girl had seemed cold and distant, like a Greek statue, and from what Marcia knew of Saylor this was not his type of woman. There suddenly flashed in her memory the image of Saylor's Red Cross poster. Of course, it was the same girl! Well, one never knew. Marcia looked forward to her party with rare anticipation.

At the Hospital the following Monday morning, Dr. Meikeljohn spied Nurse Bellamy having a cup of coffee in the commissary, and stopped by her table. He was elaborately casual as he inquired, "How is Miss Jones? She told me she was going to stay with you in the country." It was a perfectly natural question, he was thinking; the good department head inquires about the staff, keeps the staff's welfare in mind.

Ruth Bellamy stammered as she replied. In her mind was the thought she had expressed to her sister, that Dr. Mike and Althea were in love and did not know it, and further to add to her confusion was the unfortunate fact that she was always flustered when Dr. Mike spoke to her outside the operating room. There, she was, properly, all automaton, all efficiency. But elsewhere, as now in the commissary, she was nervous. "Althea, Nurse Jones," she said, "was with us but she came back. We're giving up the place, anyhow; it was just loaned us by a friend. My sister and I, that is. Althea decided to come back to New York, and she's here now, I guess." Ruth was positively babbling; she knew it but could not stop.

"Ah, good, ah, good," Dr. Meikeljohn said, stopping her and putting her out of her misery. "Pity she didn't stay, though. Needed a rest, she told me. Looked a little tired. Well, we'll be hearing from her, I suppose. Tell her I inquired if you speak to her." And he threaded his way among the crowded, white-topped tables, where nurses, internes, student nurses, doctors, orderlies, and sometimes even cops like Pete Innes came to eat and chat. The place was warm and steamy as a laundry; it smelled of coffee, Danish pastry, eggs and bacon, and hamburgers. One of the doctors had said of it, "It's revolting unless you are hungry; then it's heaven."

Hal Meikeljohn wondered. Would Althea Jones come to the party or would she not? He would like to know; he would like to be what he called "psychologically set" for her appearance if she did show up. He couldn't ask Marcia, for reasonably she would ask him why the special interest? And he hesitated to telephone Althea for a variety of reasons, the principal one being that he would have to discuss his actions of the other day, and this loomed as too much of an embarrassment. Nevertheless, he asked his secretary for Althea's home telephone number.

"Shall I get her for you, dear?" she asked. She was an elderly, gray-haired woman whose secretarial services Hal shared with the doctor in the adjoining office. A spinster, she mothered two "boys," as she called them, cloyingly—had they committed murder, she would have found justification for it—but she was efficient and quick.

Hal said no, just give him the number; he might have to call her later on.

All that afternoon Hal debated whether or not to call Althea. He earnestly wished he had an operation to perform, for once in the operating room there was nothing in his mind but the job at hand. Althea had once wondered

whether Dr. Mike's skill had become so second-nature that he could perform an operation almost by rote and actually be thinking of something else as he worked. This speculation was wrong. When Hal operated he saw nothing but the operation; no thought apart from the operation entered his mind. He was frozen in concentration.

But he was not in the operating room and finally, by five o'clock, he was completely fed up with debating with himself, and he dialed Althea's number. He let it ring perhaps a half dozen times, then hung up. There was no answer. That had decided the matter: he would see her tomorrow or he wouldn't. He somehow felt relieved about the whole matter.

Althea heard the telephone as she was letting herself into her apartment. By the time she reached the instrument it had stopped ringing. She knew with utmost positiveness that it had been Dr. Meikeljohn. That certain knowledge was disturbing to her.

It was Tuesday.

At eleven A.M. EDST, in his pressurized cabin three thousand feet above Philadelphia, en route to New York from Chicago, Joseph Saylor III was feeling good. Conquests he liked. He liked to conquer women; he liked to get the best of a business deal. (He had an agent to handle his affairs, but he didn't really need him; if it was a routine proposition, it was the agent's job to get the best of possible terms, but if it was a deal out of the ordinary, Joe took care of it—generally to Joe's advantage.) Also—and this was the best of Joe's mercurial character—if it was an artistic problem, a balance needed, a distortion made understandable, Joe would work on it alone. But lately these latter preoccupations were minor. A stream of commercial success was running Joe's way, and he was lov-

ing it. He had signed a contract in Chicago: a line drawing of a beautiful face or figure or even flower was to be superimposed on a five- (not four-) color photograph of an automobile, which was to be flown specially from Detroit to Chicago for the operation. For some reason the advertising agencies had decided that photographic studios in Chicago were better than those in Detroit. Joe didn't care. He would gladly have delivered his drawings to Timbuktu. In person. He had made a good deal, and he felt good. Almost anybody could have produced the required line drawings; what the agency was paying for—and paying well—was that tiny, meticulous signature in the lower right-hand corner of the page: *J. Saylor III.* The plane bumped and tilted as it swerved for the landing at La Guardia Airport. Joe Saylor was on top of the world. And tonight—Althea.

Wan and fatigued, Betty Schneider reported to work at eight thirty that Tuesday morning. The department store was housed in an antiquated structure, and its management had made very little effort to spruce it up and modernize it. Slowly it was deteriorating and succumbing to the killing competition of its more enterprising neighbors. But the owners didn't care. They were frank purveyors of second-rate merchandise. By cutting corners and paying salaries as low as possible, they managed to make a small profit while they awaited the day when they could sell the real estate and get out of the venture altogether. But there was a recession abroad in the land, and this was the best job Betty had been able to find.

The people at Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina, study "extrasensory perception." This is the uncanny ability, latent in everyone, to know certain facts about which he has had no previous information of any kind.

The correct reading (guessing?) of the denomination and suit of a hidden playing card is a manifestation of this. Althea's knowledge that it was Hal Meikeljohn who had telephoned her, although there was no one to tell her so, was another. Anyone who has had a job and been fired from it has experienced it. When Betty was given a message that the personnel manager wanted to see her, she knew she had been fired. Being called in to see the personnel manager was not an unusual experience. The store shifted its salespeople around almost daily, and most of these shifts entailed a visit to and a briefing by Personnel. But Betty knew that today's message was different.

Personnel was a sweet-faced Irish woman, with faded hair, which had once been red, piled high on the back of her head in an unbecoming, old-fashioned way that made you feel almost sorry for her. She always had a smile for the employees, and she always knew their personal problems and always remembered to ask concerning the health of the nearest relative. There were, however, few employees fooled by Miss Gogarty, and those who had been were soon disabused by their fellows. For Miss Gogarty there were no persons and no families; there were statistics. She always looked up the record of each employee summoned to her desk. Thus she had ready upon her tongue an intimate question about the husband, the wife, the child, the mother, or whatever. This was good employer-employee relations, she explained to her bosses, and kept the "help" (that was the word she used) contented. Contented help makes less fuss about raises. Miss Gogarty was wrong. Her help was not contented; it simply didn't have a better spot to go to.

"Come in, Betty," she said, and the smile was flashed. "And how is your sister, the nurse?"

And then she told Betty what Betty had expected.

"But it is a seasonal thing, dear. In the summertime our trade falls off. I want you to come by in early September. I'm sure we'll be able to find something for you." Miss Gogarty was not lying. She had Betty Schneider pigeonholed in her mind: *in need of money, unattractive, honest.* The perfect employee for Miss Gogarty. One she could rely upon, for the opposition (such as it was) was unlikely to hire her.

Betty was given ten days' dismissal pay according to some arcane figuring of Miss Gogarty's, which nobody but her understood but which all employees signed agreement to upon starting to work for the store. Betty walked back to her locker, picked up her hat, gloves, and purse, which she had stowed there on arrival, gave the key to a porter with a request that he turn it over to Miss Gogarty, and walked out into the dry, dusty street. Her eyes felt as dusty and dry as the street she trod. There were no tears left in her. There was hardly the energy to go and look for another job.

As she walked—*Why take a bus? I have all the time in the world*—toward the tiny flat she shared with her sister, she could hear Ruth's rough voice saying, "Honey, it's the best thing that ever happened. That dirty old hole . . . I'm glad you're out of it. Now we'll get you a real job with a real decent outfit. C'mon, Betty dear, we'll have a beer on it. The Bellamys can still afford a beer."

Betty shivered in the hot, sunny street.

At a quarter to seven that Tuesday night Althea slipped her slim body into a slightly scented bath, and rested and reflected. She had laid out her dress—an apple-green silk of the utmost simplicity and chic. She had bought it through a friend who had a friend who had a friend who

had a friend—one of those complicated transactions by which the middle man in American commerce is gradually being eliminated. Suffice it to say that at Bergdorf, where it was sold exclusively, it would have cost at least twice what Althea had paid. Marcia Meikeljohn will wonder when she sees it, Althea mused contentedly in her lukewarm bath, for any trained feminine eye would spot the lines and the workmanship as those of a top designer; indeed, a really trained eye would recognize the dress as from one of the top three American dressmakers. Marcia Meikeljohn will speculate, thought Althea, who had decided she did not like Mrs. Meikeljohn. She will also guess that it is my only evening dress, thought Althea, who was realistic.

She got out of the tub, rubbed herself briskly, and hurried to the bedroom. She flung the dress on almost brusquely, but when she looked at herself in the full-length mirror of the bathroom door, every wrinkle had magically disappeared; the dress sheathed her with desirability. Althea, who had never been vain, was vain tonight, and quite coolly and objectively she liked what she saw. She put on more lipstick than usual—that "scarlet thread" of a mouth was made more full and sensuous—and about the slender pillar of her neck she fastened an old-fashioned garnet necklace, rich and dark in color and in provocative contrast to the palenesses of her spun-gold hair and apple-green dress. She put on gold kid slippers, took a self-consciously pleased look at herself in the mirror, and most demurely closed the bathroom door as the bell sounded. She walked to the front door to admit Joe.

Marcia was sitting in the library with her father, Simon Olmsted. She was clad in a vivid scarlet dress. A string

of river diamonds was entwined in her blue-black hair, swept upward in a sort of Empire style. Around her throat, which was the lustrous and beautiful color of old ivory, was a fabulous necklace of pigeon-blood rubies. The necklace was insured for a quarter of a million dollars, and had been given by Simon Olmsted to his wife, from whom Marcia had inherited it. Insurance on jewelry is high, and Marcia usually kept the necklace in her bank vault, where it did not have to be covered. Whenever she chose to wear it she notified the company, and for the period of its freedom from the vault the string of staggeringly beautiful stones was properly insured. If someone should snatch it from Marcia's pretty neck, she would be repaid its value in dollars. It was doubtful, Simon Olmsted mused, that so perfectly matched a string of stones could be reassembled during Marcia's lifetime. Therefore, in the event of its loss she would be given dollars instead of a replacement in jewelry, which an insurance company prefers. Simon Olmsted knew the value of the necklace; it had taken him twenty years to put it together. He also knew that Marcia wore it on special occasions only.

He was smoking a cigar, and before him was a balloon glass containing a fragrant armagnac, his favorite liqueur, an indulgence Marcia well knew and exploited—but with love, for she worshiped and admired her father.

"All right, my dear," said he, at ease and comfortable in the house he had given his daughter, "why are you wearing the rubies? They are reserved for special occasions, aren't they? And this sudden whim of a midsummer party in town is perhaps special, but hardly to the point of your wearing what I take to be a rather expensive Balenciaga gown as well as the necklace."

Simon Olmsted was orotund. He knew it, and it rather pleased him; he felt he had the right to be.

Marcia was looking at him quietly, but her mind was on other things. She was rechecking each of the manifold details that always precede a party. She was like a general at H-hour minus one. It was now seven thirty. The invitations were for half past eight, indicating that there would be no food served until midnight. The musicians would arrive any moment now and be installed in the second-floor music room, whose windows opened upon the marble floor beneath. The caterers were already at work in the kitchen and pantry; the bartenders (two of them) stood in a corner set up for them in the music room, automatically polishing glasses that were already polished and twirling the necks of champagne bottles, which protruded like periscopes from buckets of ice. Everything seemed under control.

"I don't know, Father," said Marcia, finally getting around to answering the question. "I just feel special about this party. I don't know what it is. But anyhow, I don't wear the rubies half enough."

"Well, my dear, if you feel special, by all means be dressed special." He was aware that all was not well between his daughter and his son-in-law, the much admired successor to Dr. Folsom and the "youngest surgeon to head his department in the history of the Hospital." But he would not bring the subject up; that was for Marcia to do. He was there ready to help if and when she needed him. Perhaps the "special" something had to do with patching their marital difficulties; he hoped so. He recognized, however, that the two young people had different temperaments and, probably, different values. He did not criticize, but he was sorry.

Marcia sighed, then hearing the front doorbell, rose and smoothed her gorgeous dress. The butler ushered in the

evening's first guests. They were a young architect, whose wife and infant child were in Nantucket for the summer, and his wife's best friend, one of America's top dress designers. The party had begun.

CHAPTER 6

JOE BEAMED as Althea opened the door for him. He was dressed in a single-breasted, shawl-collar, lightweight evening jacket made for him in Rome by Cifonelli; he wore patent-leather shoes from Church's of London; his collar-attached pleated voile shirt came from Paris. He radiated international elegance and supreme confidence. He brought no flowers, for Althea rarely wore them.

"Joe," Althea said smiling, "whatever they may say about you, nobody can deny that you're a handsome and attractive guy. Would you like to have a drink before we go? It's still early."

"There's some sour with the sweet of that compliment, dear." Joe pecked fraternally and almost absently at her cheek. "But no, I want to show you off. We'll go to the Colony for a drink and a bite to eat; it's on the way."

"Anything you say. I'll get a scarf."

"*Anything* I say?"

The remark could be taken any number of ways. It caused Althea a momentary chill, but she quickly dis-

pelled it. There must be nothing to mar this night. It was dedicated to Ruth Bellamy and her sister, Betty, and Joe, though he knew it not, had been cast in the role of the white knight who was to rescue the damsels in distress. Technically, she thought amusedly, Betty probably did not qualify as a damsel, but Ruth did and this was sufficient.

"Certainly," she said, very lightly, "anything you say. And I have something important I want to talk to you about."

"I know you have," said Joe, and stopped Althea right in her tracks. So lost had she become in the problem of the sisters, so much had she been thinking of Joe as a friend in need, as he had been in what might be termed his "pre-courtship" days, that she had completely forgotten that she, too, had a personal problem and that it involved Joe. This time she did shudder slightly, but she wrapped her scarf about her shoulders with a careless air, saying, "All right, Joe, we'll talk later. Let's go."

There were not many people at the Colony; it was summer. Joe recognized a few friends who were also going to the party. He nodded pleasantly, preening himself as the men eyed Althea with unabashed admiration, and followed the headwaiter to a discreet and good table, the kind of table that Joe always commanded. He ordered for Althea a Dubonnet cocktail and for himself his usual Chivas Regal Scotch. They decided to have nothing but a salad. "Marcia, I am told, serves just about the best food in New York," Joe said. "It would be a pity to fill up on the food from just any restaurant, like the Colony." The headwaiter, for whose benefit the remark had been made, gave the required grin but it was somewhat sickly. Joe, indirectly of course, was complimenting one of the best restaurants in New York, but the headwaiter was a literal

soul who liked his tips big and his compliments direct. He didn't much like Joe's little joke.

"Do you want to talk now or later?" said Joe suddenly after they had indulged in a spate of trivialities.

Althea thought this was a bad moment to broach the subject of Betty Schneider, and she surely didn't want to discuss now anything concerning her own relationship with Joe. What ever had made her think that this evening would be a good time to have a serious discussion with Joe? She shouldn't have accepted Marcia Meikeljohn's invitation (although she was curious about the party she was somewhat reluctant to go), and she could just as well, nay, more easily have spoken to Joe on the morrow. But she felt an urgency about the Bellamy-Schneider matter; she feared any postponement.

"Later, Joe," she said, smiling. "We don't want to be serious before the dance. Let's not stay too late, and you take me for a cup of coffee around midnight or so. Okay?"

"Okay. I've even anticipated you. I have coffee ready and even champagne on ice in the flat. [Joe always referred to his apartment as a flat.] We'll be quieter there."

Again Althea felt a premonition of something unpleasant. And yet, why? She had been alone with him in his apartment when she had posed for the Red Cross poster; he had talked passes but never made them.

"But can't you tell me one thing, anyhow?" he went on. "Have you made up your mind about us? Have you come to your senses and are you going to marry me?"

"No, Joe, I haven't made up my mind. And that isn't what I want to talk about, anyway."

"Hell. I can't understand you." Joe had another Scotch.

"Don't drink too much, dear. I want you clear-headed tonight." Althea was worried. They weren't even at the dance yet, and Joe had already had four whiskeys.

They ate their salad in almost complete silence. Joe signed the bill with an angry flourish. Althea was downcast. She seemed to be doing everything wrong, but Joe was so difficult. How cope with his petulance and his temper and, lately, his increased drinking? And he expected her to marry such a person? Joe himself was making up her mind for her.

They arrived at Marcia's house at ten o'clock. Althea was thrilled by the beauty of the spectacle that greeted her eyes. Around the four columns that once had graced the ancient city of Rome, danced beautiful women, bejeweled and clad in gowns of every color in the firmament and from every fashionable dressmaker in America or on the Continent. The younger men all seemed tall, good-looking, and crew-cut. The older men seemed tall, good-looking, and distinguished. This was America's aristocracy of wealth, confident, even arrogant but withal, good-natured. Only Joe, his dark brows faintly frowning, seemed surly. And I am to blame, thought Althea distractedly, feeling guilt where there was no guilt, feeling blame where there was none—unless blame can be attached to a girl because she is beautiful and desirable.

They stood on the threshold of the floor, watching the dancers swirl by in their myriad colors, seeing their reflections in the tall mirrors that made the dance floor seem twice its size. From the room above them the music was incessant and insistent, pouring through the inside windows upon the dancers beneath, bidding them dance, dance, dance. It was pagan. It was lovely.

"Can't see Marcia," Joe said. "She must be upstairs."

Althea, following him up red-carpeted stairs, reflected that it hadn't taken him long to learn his way about the house. They found Marcia in the library looking at the

dancers through windows that corresponded to those of the music room opposite. She turned coolly, graciously, and extended her hand.

"Welcome, my dear. Of course we've met before, but I've never really had a chance to have a talk with you. I do so want to. You must tell me about Hal. I believe you see more of him than I."

She was obviously talking for time, time to appraise Althea as detachedly as she might examine a vase at an auction. Why? wondered Althea. Surely Dr. Meikeljohn hadn't mentioned that one moment of indiscretion. Perhaps it was only natural curiosity about one of her husband's staff.

"Have you seen Hal?" Marcia went on, and not waiting for an answer: "He is probably in the bar—which is in the music room, if you two want a drink. Why don't you have a dance, and we'll get together over supper. We'll have our girls' talk, you and I." And she patted Althea. "You look beautiful in that pale green. The perfect color for you."

They were dismissed, and Althea had spoken not a word.

Joe took her downstairs, danced twice around the floor, and said, "This is hot work, honey. Let's inspect that bar. Ought to say hello to our host and your boss, anyhow. Damn bad manners not to." Althea didn't want Joe at the bar but knew it wise not to protest. Besides, she did want to see Dr. Meikeljohn.

He was standing at the bar, poised but boyish looking, his closely cropped curly hair capping his head. There was something different, she realized, between Joe's handsomeness and Hal Meikeljohn's: there was something flashy and superficial about Joe's; Hal's seemed somehow more profound.

Hal was all gaiety now. "Althea," he cried, shaking her hand, and he introduced the men about him. "The best-looking nurse in the Hospital and I'll wager among the top ten beauties here tonight. That can't get me in trouble, can it?" He grinned at Althea. "Let me have a dance, will you?" he asked of both Althea and Joe, and without waiting for a reply, he took her arm and led her downstairs.

"I had to talk to you, you know, Althea."

"I know, Dr. Mike, but . . . "

"Look, when we're not at the Hospital will you call me Hal?"

"Do you think your wife would like that?"

"Why not? I'll tell her I asked you to." Without knowing it, Hal with that sentence was admitting that indeed Marcia might object.

"I didn't mean anything by that. It was just a thought I had."

"Althea . . . "

"Yes . . . Hal?"

They both laughed at the hesitancy and awkwardness with which, for the first time, she called her boss by his first name.

"You know . . . the other day . . . in my office . . . "

"Yes, Dr. Mike—I mean, Hal. It was one of those things. On my part, too. We just pretend it never happened. And we don't let it happen again."

Hal had never doubted this would be Althea's attitude. He was nonetheless relieved to hear her state it. He was also, perversely, sorry.

"You're right, of course." And then lightly: "But as the fellow says, it was pretty nice while it lasted."

"It never happened," Althea said firmly.

She felt noble and self-sacrificing. She felt happy and intimate. Hal pressed her closely to him, and they concen-

trated on dancing, speaking for the while no more. To an observer they would have looked less like two young persons renouncing what might become a love affair than two young lovers having a good time on the dance floor. And there was an observer.

Marcia, after a brief appearance on the dance floor and a hostesslike glance at the bar, had resumed her position at the library window. With her was Joe, drink in hand. Marcia's interest in Althea stemmed from the coincidence that she should be both a girl of Joe's and a member of Hal's staff. She had thought it odd that Joe should pick a nurse to accompany him to the party, but now that she saw the nurse she understood. She found it natural that her husband should dance perhaps a little more than was necessary with his staff nurse. He would want to put her at ease; besides she *was* a beautiful girl. She was aware that she felt a certain antagonism toward Althea, but she shrugged it off as a casual rubbing-the-wrong-way that might happen between any two persons. It was Joe who filtered the first drop of poison into her mind.

Watching them dance, surely the most striking couple on the floor, he realized, with what he took to be sudden and blinding clarity, that Althea was putting him off because she was in love with Hal. It figured: secretaries were always falling in love with their bosses; why not nurses? why not, in particular, a dedicated nurse like Althea whose boss was not only a brilliant surgeon but an attractive man as well? How to put a stop to this? He didn't know, but he knew he had not far to look for an ally. He took a swallow from his drink and said, meaningfully:

"They make a lovely couple, don't they?"

He purposely didn't indicate the couple he was thinking of, and it pleased him as much as it irritated Marcia that

she knew immediately. Now that he had scored a point, he went on:

"A lucky guy, that Hal, to have her around all the time. Me, she won't give me the time of day."

He had aroused Marcia. "Are you in love with her?" she asked.

"I have asked her to marry me."

"And she won't have you? You, one of the catches of New York?" Marcia was angry—at Joe for his insinuations and at Hal because they might be true, and certainly at Althea for having the composure and self-confidence not to jump at what most marriageable girls in New York would consider a chance in a lifetime.

Joe's glass was empty, and he moved as if to go back to the bar.

"You might cut down on that drinking if you're courting her," Marcia said coldly. "I don't imagine registered nurses like that kind of excess." Although these two had known each other only a comparatively short time, they could speak baldly and frankly; they had much in common. "I don't know just what I can do, but I'll see and do what I can. I wish you happiness, Mr. Saylor, and one thing is sure: I don't want her messing around my husband."

Joe, having got his message over, blew her a kiss and left—for the bar. "You may be right," he said, smiling conspiratorially, "but one has to indulge in the classic gestures that go with the broken, or breaking, heart."

The music now stopped with a flourish, and the caterers went to work. The doors to the dining room, two large gilded wood antiques from Italy, were opened. The dining room adjoined the marble hall where the guests had been dancing, and as obedient as sheep, they now filed in to be fed. It was precisely twelve o'clock. Marcia's parties ran on schedule.

Joe found Althea, seated her at a table, and went to the buffet table for her. Marcia spotted her, as she was roaming about assuring herself that all went well, and sat beside her just as Hal walked by. She grabbed his hand and pulled him next to her saying, "Sit with us a moment, darling. I'm just getting acquainted with Althea. If she's as competent a nurse as she is beautiful a girl, you're a lucky doctor."

"I'm a lucky doctor," said Hal.

"And I guess Joe Saylor's lucky, too, dear," Marcia said, turning to Althea, who, subconsciously sensing that some game was being played, felt uncomfortable. "Or isn't he?" Marcia asked archly.

"I wouldn't know how to answer that question, Mrs.—"

"You must call me Marcia." The interruption was quick. "I'm sure you could answer if you wanted, but never mind. We'll still have that chat—some day very soon. Hal, do you realize we've never had your whole staff over here for a party? It's most remiss of us. This fall we'll do something about it."

"A very sound idea, my dear. I'll not forget to remind you." Hal was puzzled. It was evident to him, too, that Marcia was up to something, but he wondered mostly at her making it so obvious. Marcia's usual long suit was subtlety.

"Here comes Joe," Marcia said, rising. "Let's leave these two together and tend to our other guests." She patted Joe on the cheek as she led Hal away, threw a warm smile at Althea and went on her way.

Joe's apartment was his studio as well. It was a big two-story affair with a two-story glazed window as most of its north wall. The walls were dead-white plaster, on which paintings by Joe, mostly unframed, hung in artless confu-

sion. Against the south wall of the studio room was a brown-stained wood staircase leading up to Joe's bedroom and bath. On the first floor and leading into the studio was a small kitchen, a small pantry, and a gigantic refrigerator. From this Joe was extricating a plate of small sandwiches his maid-by-the-day had created for him and covered with a damp napkin to keep them fresh. He placed the plate on a long, low table in front of Althea, who was seated on a divan that was hardly more than a huge mattress laid on the floor and that could serve as a guest bed. It was covered by an old and faded Paisley spread that by its very dinginess achieved a sort of elegance. It was, in short, a perfect New York bachelor's apartment, its bohemianism tempered by its opulence (as, for instance, the beautiful French crystal glasses that Joe was now bringing in from the pantry), its informality and devil-may-care aura belied by its scrupulous cleanliness.

Joe popped open a bottle of champagne for Althea and poured a glass for her; for himself he poured a tumbler of whiskey and topped it with a splash of soda. Althea watched him warily. An oppressive silence had fallen upon them. Joe struggled manfully to dispel it. Holding his glass to the light and examining it critically, he said, "Most people like Scotch and soda; I like soda and Scotch. Reversed proportions. Very artistic."

Althea said nothing.

"I hope your champagne isn't as flat as my joke.

"Come on, Althea, snap out of it. Here's to you, my dear, and to *you*." He raised his glass to Althea and then swung around and toasted the original of her famous portrait, hanging on the wall—the Red Cross poster.

Althea smiled wanly. "Joe, sit down and be still." She sounded a little as if she were talking to a child. "I have something important to discuss with you.

"And just for now, don't—" But she stopped because she knew the rebellion in Joe, knew that to tell him to stop drinking would spur him to further indulgence in defiance. But of course she might as well have completed her admonition, for it was quite obvious what she had in mind. Joe, however, reacted pleasantly.

"Anything you say, dear," he said, and put down his glass. "That's what you said earlier this evening, remember?

"Now"—and he sat down contentedly opposite her—"when are we going to get married? I'll give up all my bad habits, and all I'll do is paint and make love to you, and we'll travel all over the world whenever we feel like it."

Ah, the temptation to Althea, who had never been east of New York or west of the Mississippi. But she was distracted for only a fleeting moment.

"No, Joe. That's not the subject of discussion tonight. There's something, though, I'd like you to do for me."

"I'll do anything in the world I can for you, Althea, and you know it. But I think we should put first things first. I've asked you a question, and you've been ducking it. Don't you believe me—"

"Joe, *please*, can't we go into that later? I don't want to be sidetracked—"

"*Sidetracked!*"

"Oh, Joe, *will* you listen to me!" Althea was close to tears of frustration. "Right now you're being so stubborn and hateful no girl in her right mind would marry you."

This seemed to sober Joe. Apparently chastened, he nodded. "All right, go ahead. What's on your mind, and what can I do about it?"

"There is in the Hospital," Althea began, "a girl, a nurse, named Ruth Bellamy, and she is my dearest friend."

Was she stretching the truth in order to make her plea more personal and eloquent? It was possible. And yet in the last few days—was it only days?—she *had* felt an extraordinary closeness to that good-hearted, simple girl and a deep feeling of worry and participation in her sorrow and despair. "Ruth has a sister, Betty, and . . . "

She told the story then, simply and movingly. It was a straightforward narrative, related without hesitancy. Althea did not realize it, but often she quoted from the letter she had written her grandparents and which she should receive an answer to maybe even tomorrow. It was two o'clock in the morning, a late hour for Althea, but she had not reported back for duty at the Hospital and the subject had not been brought up by Hal during the party.

New York never sleeps, but most of it sleeps at night. It was very quiet outside the studio-apartment. Occasionally the whiz of taxi wheels reminded them of the outside, and once a brief and muted wail of an ambulance approaching a street corner chilled Althea with the thought that everywhere there were people in need, as Ruth and Betty were now. To what tragedy, to what sorrow, sped that ambulance? But mostly there was no sound except Althea's low, earnest voice. The room was a lighted bubble floating in the darkness of the city. There was no reality but Althea and Joe . . . and the story she was telling.

Joe listened attentively, but he fidgeted and once he rose to replenish his drink. He was chain-smoking, and his face was completely without expression.

And now Althea was saying, "And that's it, Joe. I would like you to lend me some money for those girls. I am going to give them some from my savings account, but it is not enough. I want to raise enough money to keep them going for a year and to make it possible for Betty to reclaim that baby. And I know that a year from

now the same thing will probably have to be done again.

"I shall make myself responsible for this loan. It should not, as things go, be too much, and you know eventually I will inherit from my grandparents. I'll draw up a paper so that at that time you will be repaid in full if possible—and I feel sure it will be possible."

She was leaning forward, her hands clasped on her knees, her head bowed, her eyes staring at some imaginary spot on the floor. Her voice now was so low as to be almost inaudible.

"The girls will pay me back. One day they'll no longer have the burden of their mother. . . . Betty, once she has her child back, will take a new lease on life, get a better job. Ruth will . . . be promoted. [She had been about to say that Ruth would marry Pete, but had thought better of it. Of course, she did not know how ironic was her thought about Betty.]

"But I don't care whether they pay me or not. I just want to help them."

She stopped. She was through.

Joe said, "Althea, you are a darling, you are sweet; your heart is as big as your darling golden head. You are also a damned fool."

He paused, as if for effect. But Althea did not move, nor did she glance at him.

"In the first place, I consider you a fool, well-meaning but still a fool, to want to mortgage your future for the sake of the future of somebody else—Ruth whatever-her-name-is and her sister. I even question your moral right to earmark your grandparents' money for repayment of the debt you are trying to incur. That isn't what they're giving you the money for; that isn't why they saved it. What do you think they'd say if they'd heard you tonight?"

Even in these few words there was a deadly logic that

crushed Althea; she felt helpless. Relentlessly Joe went on:

"There are institutions, there are funds, to take care of cases like this, and I'll investigate them for you. But you, you cannot, indeed you must not, lend them money. It is very simple, Althea; you cannot afford to. The kind of charity you propose is a luxury. It is a luxury beyond your means."

Joe drained his glass, went into the pantry and poured himself another "soda and Scotch." Althea was surprised by his lucidity and disturbed by it. There was truth in what he said, and yet—and yet Joe's materialism could not be the answer. *The sisters had to be helped.*

"As you probably know—as a matter of fact you do of course know it, and that is why you have been speaking to me about this matter—I am a rich man," Joe went on. "And I expect, if you'll forgive me, to be a good deal richer before I'm any poorer. I could give money to those sisters of yours and not have it returned and not be the slightest bothered about it. *But I'm not going to.*

"I'm not being heartless. In the first place there are plenty of people *I* know whom I help. I don't know your nurse and her sister. And while a few moments ago I could have been accused of boasting about my wealth, it is manifestly impossible for me to help the friends in want of every one of my friends.

"No, I'm not going to help your pals. They're not my responsibility, but indeed they may be yours. If you had the money, Althea, you could help them. *And you know how you can have the money.*

"And that brings us back squarely to question number one. How about it, Althea? Will you cease this senseless temporizing, will you say yes?"

He put down his glass, sat beside her, and took her in

his arms and started to kiss her. Althea wrenched away from him and stood, quietly facing him. She was utterly calm, utterly downcast.

"You make your own answer, Joe, and it is no. No now, no any day. You ask me to marry you on a trial basis; 'if it doesn't work, you can always get a divorce,' you say. Now you say, 'Sure, I'll give you some money for your friends, but you have to marry me first.'

"What kind of person are you, anyway, or was I always wrong about you?

"Of course"—she couldn't resist the sarcasm—"I could combine your thoughtful propositions. I could marry you for a day, give your lousy money to my friends, and divorce you that afternoon. It would serve you right.

"I don't hate you, Joe. I hate myself for not having realized long ago how shallow and selfish you really are.

"Good-by, Joe. This is for keeps."

She started toward the door, but Joe grabbed her arm. She winced.

"Don't be afraid." Joe was smiling cruelly. "I'm not going to beat you up, though you make me sound like a guy who would. I just want to thank you for your pretty speech. Just let me make a little one before you go. In your own way you're just as drunk as I am. But you'll sober up.

"Hal Meikeljohn is never going to marry you, Althea. He knows a good thing when he's got one, and Marcia doesn't want him to get away, anyhow. You'll get over that infatuation, and then perhaps you won't think I'm such a heel, after all. Whatever, by the way, became of that thinking-over period I thought you were going to take?

"There's a doorman downstairs. He'll get you a taxi."

He opened the door and bowed politely and ironically as Althea walked out.

The reaction from this scene as well as the liquor he had been drinking had intoxicated him. He raised his glass in a mock toast to the portrait of Althea. "Seems to me," he said aloud, "the last time we were out together you threw a glass at something or other. Well, my blonde honey, my honey blonde, I feel like throwing this at you. "But I have better use for it." He drained the glass, sank down upon the divan, and put his head in his hands. Presently he fell asleep.

There was nobody awake in the city; there was nobody in the city but the driver and her, and he was her friend. "Pretty late out in the city for a pretty girl like you, lady," he said, "but I'll get you home safely." "Oh, please do," she had answered, almost weeping at the kind words.

Hal Meikeljohn is never going to marry you, Althea.

Hal Meikeljohn is never . . .

Hal Meikeljohn . . . Hal Meikeljohn . . .

It couldn't be true she loved Hal as Joe had said. But if Joe thought she was in love with Hal, then maybe Marcia thought so, too, and that would explain her strange behavior. But she wasn't in love with him, she wasn't. And if she were, there would be nothing to do but forget it. "Sober up," Joe had said. But it wasn't true that Hal knew a good thing when he had one. That was Joe's wicked, spiteful talk. Hal loved his wife; of course he did, despite the gossip in the Hospital.

What had happened to her, Althea, the so-called cool and imperturbable? Where was her sense of direction? And what was happening to Ruth and poor Betty? And Hal? Hal was sleeping soundly, and tomorrow would be just another day at the Hospital. What would Hal say if

he knew that one of his nurses was almost in tears at the thought of him, sitting alone in a taxi at three o'clock in the morning?

"Lady," said the driver, "I'd like to sit here all night, but I've got some work to do. We've been here just about five minutes."

Althea paid him and let herself into her apartment. She undressed and washed in the dark. She couldn't bear to look at herself; she didn't want to see anything, she didn't want to think any more. She slipped into bed and whispered a prayer for the opiate of sleep. Eventually it came to her.

CHAPTER 7

A FEW DAYS LATER the letter arrived. Althea had not spoken to Ruth; she had been waiting for the response from her grandparents so that her contribution would be larger than that afforded by her savings account only. Ruth, on her part, had been diffident about telephoning Althea, and the latter did not know that Betty had been fired.

The envelope bore the familiar upstate postmark and the familiar bold handwriting of her grandfather. Althea held the letter in her hand for a moment before opening it. This was it, she was thinking, the turning point—for her and for the Bellamys. Her grandparents who had

never let her down and from whom she derived her strength. She wondered just how they proposed to give her the money; she hoped there would not be too much red tape, too much signing of documents. Grandfather was a cautious farmer in a cautious Republican county. Things had to be done carefully and legally when Grandfather did them. She read:

My dear, dear Althea,

It is always good to hear from you, and Grandmother and I are happy to hear you are in good health. When are you coming to pay us a visit? It has been a long time.

I am sure you are anxious to hear what we have to say about your friend Mrs. Betty Schneider, and I will get right to the point. But first let me say that this is not a hasty decision. Grandmother and I have discussed the matter very thoroughly and at great length.

You are of course right, dear, that you will inherit our money someday and this farm, too. The Lord has willed it that you are our only heir, and we are glad and thankful that this should be so. How we pray, Grandmother and I, that you will marry some boy from around here who will keep the farm going. We hate to think of the farm being sold. There are so many nice boys here, and there is a good hospital in Hudson if you want to keep up your nursing. But this is getting away from the point.

Now, my dear, if the money were already yours there would be nobody to tell you how to use it, although I might as well say right now that Grandmother and I do not approve of your plan, although we admire and sympathize with your feelings.

I have not been too strict a parent to you since your father died. You know that I believe in Polonius' advice, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be," but I know there are exceptions to be made. We don't think this is such a case.

I cannot keep from mentioning that Mrs. Schneider's plight is her own fault. She allowed herself to be put into a position where she had to marry a man who was unsuitable. But I believe I can truly say we did not allow this to affect our decision.

We simply do not believe, Althea dear, that you should give away your money to these people, no matter how dear they are to you or how deserving. There are, unfortunately, many other persons in circumstances just as dire. Cannot some welfare agency help Mrs. Schneider? That is where she should go for assistance, not to a friend.

How like what Joe had said and yet how unlike Joe himself! Here every word breathed rectitude, but tempered with sympathy. No thought of self here. By what different routes can people arrive at the same conclusion!

My dear [the letter went on], we do not feel morally justified . . .

"I even question your moral right . . . " Joe had said.

. . . in advancing or giving you money under the circumstances you outline. And I must repeat, that even if you had the money required for this project, Grandmother and I would not approve of it.

There is, however, something we seriously wish to add to this letter.

You know—how well you know!—our farm and how much room there is in it now that there is nobody here really except Grandmother and me. There would be plenty of room here for Mrs. Schneider and her baby. And on a farm one or two extra mouths to feed is nothing—you know that, too. We would be glad to put Mrs. Schneider and her baby up *as long as she wants*. She should not consider it charity; Grandmother and I would be pleased as punch to have a tiny one around again. And it would be good and healthy for the baby *and* for Mrs. Schneider, who, from what you say and after all her experiences, must be sickly. There are plenty of jobs open in Hudson—most of the girls leave to go to the city these days. She could work in a store, since that is what she has been doing, though she would probably do better with one of the manufacturing concerns.

I don't have to tell you that this would give us pleasure. Nobody here would need to know the circumstances of the birth of the little child. It is enough for us and for all our neighbors to know that Mrs. Schneider is a friend of yours.

Think it over, dearest Althea. We believe this is a far better solution than lending money. More farsighted and better all around.

Your loving grandfather,
Timothy Jones

P.S. Of course we have no thought of having Mrs. Schneider pay board, since any friend of yours is a friend of ours and we do not charge our friends for our hospitality. Nonetheless we understand that there might be a matter of pride involved in the case of Mrs. Schneider, and if—and only if—it would put

her more at ease to pay us a small rental, we would accept it under those conditions, you understand. We could easily settle that once we found a position for her in Hudson, as I have suggested.

P.P.S. In case, and we hope this will not be so, you and Mrs. Schneider do not like our plan, I revert to my mention of welfare agencies. We know of none and possibly you do not, either, so why do you not speak of the matter to Dr. Meikeljohn. You have spoken so highly of him; we think he might be of great assistance.

T. J.

Was not, thought Althea, going to the farm the ideal solution indeed? It would be good for the boy and certainly for Betty. Poor, sallow Betty could do with a breath of country air; how wonderful it would be for her to get out of those bargain basements! Althea's grandparents —bless their hearts—could be counted upon to make Betty feel at home, and once she was there Althea knew they would adopt her as one of their very own. She recognized their longing to have a "tiny one around again." Subconsciously she must have known they would not give her money; the farm was the answer, and Althea was glad it was they who had suggested it. Betty would be happy there, she was sure, although she felt the reserve implied in the repeated references to "Mrs. Schneider"; "your friend Betty" would have been more in character under ordinary circumstances.

But would Betty go? "There might be a matter of pride involved," the letter had said. Yes, there might, but if so, Althea would exorcise it and quickly. There was a

crisis looming; there was no time for nonsense like that. And the move would also free Ruth for Pete.

But deep within her, Althea had the fear that Betty would indeed refuse to go. It might seem to her a complete submission to charity; borrowing money might seem to her more impersonal, even businesslike. And then she thought of the letter's second postscript: "You have spoken so highly of him; we think he might be of great assistance."

Dr. Mike (Hal?) would certainly help. She would ask his advice confidentially, and anyhow she had to speak to him about returning to work. She picked up the telephone and dialed the Hospital. The thought of what Joe had said came to her, and her hand quivered ever so slightly as it held the receiver. But she banned this thought from her mind, as she had almost succeeded in banning all thoughts of Joe. She wanted that unfortunate affair to be a closed chapter.

As for Joe, he wakened the morning after the party fully clothed, on the divan. It was about eleven A.M. He knew he should not but he couldn't resist looking at himself in a mirror. He saw an unshaved, tousled, and bleary individual in crumpled evening clothes that looked awful in the pale citron of city summer morning. He poured himself some tomato juice from a pitcher in the refrigerator, and in a sudden defiant gesture laced it with Worcestershire sauce and vodka. He drank this and felt better, thinking the while that he had better not make a habit of it. If one can remember anything clearly and still be hazy about it, such would be a description of Joe's recollection of the night before. He wanted to telephone Althea, to re-establish contact with her, but he knew this was not the moment for it. Althea would simply hang up

when she heard his voice. This was a situation, as he later told a friend at his club, "that is pretty serious. It's not something that two dozen roses will fix up."

He shaved and dressed (rather he undressed, shaved and showered, and dressed again), had black coffee given him by the maid, who had now shown up, and felt almost chipper. Joe was a buoyant man; a couple of Martinis and luncheon at his club, where there were no women to remind him of yesterday's difficulties, and he felt chipper again. He returned to his "flat" and telephoned Marcia.

"A lovely party, dear, and thanks. How long did it last? I left around one, said good-by to Hal but couldn't find you. Sorry. Will make amends."

"The party broke at two," Marcia answered, using a theatrical term she fancied. "And you can make amends. Hal is in Philadelphia and will not be home till late if he doesn't spend the night there. If you're free, why don't you come and have some leftovers, and we'll take in an early movie."

"You're on. Six okay?"

"Okay. How did you make out with your lady?"

"Didn't. Got turned down flat."

"You didn't like that, did you, dear?" Marcia was amused and also a little sarcastic. She knew that a rebuff would only spur Joe to greater efforts to make a conquest, and she wondered what this might mean to her. Althea seemed to have become a pivot about which revolved Joe, her husband (if Joe was to be believed), and herself. She didn't like it and said so:

"I didn't particularly relish what you were hinting at last night, Joe. You know nurses are in great demand these days, and there are other hospitals than Hal's.

"And," she added slowly, "other cities than New York."

"Look here, Marcia, don't go and do anything rash. There may be nothing in the world between Hal and Althea. After all, I just said how lucky he was to have—"

"That may be all you said, but you meant more and you wanted me to think more." The interruption was angry.

"Marcia, suppose we talk about this when I see you? It isn't a conversation for the telephone."

"All right, Joe Saylor, all right. But let me ask you one question. Are you really in love with her? Or do you think you are because she hasn't fallen for your devastating charms and you can't take no from a woman?"

This was perceptive of Marcia, for there was much truth in what she surmised. It was this common intuition possessed by Marcia and Joe that had brought them together so quickly and had made them feel like old friends on so short an acquaintanceship. Something in Joe recognized the truth that Marcia was brushing, but something stronger and more controlled refused to admit it. He contented himself with answering, "I have told you I asked her to marry me. I did again last night."

"That's twice," said Marcia almost jeeringly. "Once more will be three, and is three strikes out?"

"How about our talking about it when I see you? I thought we agreed this isn't a conversation for the telephone."

"All right, my pet. I'll see you at six."

Joe arrived promptly. He had wanted to bring a small gift of thanks. He had thought of caviar, but the house was probably full of caviar left from the party. The same with flowers. Finally, he found for twenty-five cents a hear-no-evil, see-no-evil, speak-no-evil trio of monkeys. It seemed deliciously appropriate. Marcia and he laughed delightedly over it and settled down to continue their

conversation. But they discovered that they had really been through it all on the telephone and there was little more to say. Marcia thought she would question Hal, but Joe, a little worried at perhaps having aroused her suspicions unfairly, advised against it. Marcia said anyway she'd talk to Althea about Joe, and Joe, though he thought it would mean nothing one way or the other, rather liked the idea of having *somebody* say something nice about him. Hal telephoned at seven thirty to say he would spend the night in Philadelphia, and Marcia and Joe went to the movies for an eight o'clock show in a neighborhood theater. It was a dull picture and evening. Marcia felt it was an eve to something important, but if so it was a dull eve, too.

It was the Thursday after Marcia's party that Althea received her grandfather's letter and telephoned Dr. Meikeljohn. She asked his secretary for an appointment and was told to come to his office the next day at four thirty in the afternoon. At almost the same time that Althea was telephoning about Ruth, Ruth was meeting Pete Innes, her policeman boyfriend, at a little Third Avenue restaurant, a favorite of theirs, where they often had coffee and crullers. Ruth was off duty until Monday. Ordinarily she would have gone to Mt. Kisco for the week-end, but she had given the place up that very week for reasons of economy, and some other friends of her friends were now in residence. Ruth was sorry. She would have liked Betty to have gotten out of town for a few days. Pete was not in uniform; he, too, was off duty, until midnight. They had the place to themselves.

"Ruth," he was saying earnestly, "I'm getting a promotion next month. We can do it now. Let's not wait any longer."

"Pete darling, I don't want to any more than you do. But Betty . . . This has hit her awfully hard. I keep telling her it's all for the best, that it was a lousy job anyhow and we'll find something better. And that even if we don't, they *said* it was just a summer layoff and she could come back in the fall. But she just sits there and broods. I found some ads in the classified, but I don't even know if she went to answer them.

"It's like everything's been taken out of her."

Pete took a gulp of coffee and stared fixedly at Ruth from his china-blue eyes. Despite his generally boyish appearance he now looked grown-up, as if he had matured even beyond Ruth, who heretofore had been inclined to mother him.

"I know things are rough with Betty, Ruth, but you gotta face it, they may be that way a long time. No matter how much you love her, you can't throw your life away because of her. You're going to marry me, Ruth, as soon as I get that promotion."

For answer, Ruth took his face in her hands and kissed him fully and long on the mouth. She, who for years had been carrying the burden of an invalid mother and of a sister who was becoming more and more dependent upon her, was being given an order. It was a wonderful feeling—of liberation, of exhilaration.

"Yes, yes, Pete," she whispered, and kissed him again. "We won't wait. You're right.

"Perhaps our getting married will be just what Betty needs to snap her out of it. And maybe Althea will come up with something. She's a bright girl, and she's working on it.

"Oh, Pete, I was at the end of my rope. You're perfectly right. We won't wait. We won't wait any longer."

The proprietor of the restaurant had seen them kiss

before, but this seemed something out of the ordinary. If he had been running a bar, he would have sent them a drink, but to send them a cup of coffee on the house seemed silly. So he did nothing but beam upon them.

Hal Meikeljohn's Fridays, barring emergencies, were devoted to his private practice. Two or three new patients might be expected and as many as twenty to thirty former ones who were reporting for their regular check-ups. It took time, and it was fatiguing. Hal usually worked through till two and then went home, had a bite to eat, and took a brief nap. Sometimes he took the rest of the day off; other times, as today, he left for the Hospital to run through his mail, hold consultations, keep appointments.

He walked down from his third-floor bedroom to the library to bid Marcia good-by, but she detained him.

"Let me speak to you a minute, Hal."

"Certainly. Anything wrong?"

"I don't know. Perhaps you can tell me."

There was a pause. Hal had nothing to say; it was clearly still Marcia's turn. And Marcia did not beat about the bush.

"Your nurse Althea Jones. She's very good?"

Hal had a clear presentiment of what was to come and he cringed from it, but he managed to answer dryly and casually, "Yes. One of the best in the Hospital. In any department."

"In that case I wish you would transfer her to another department. Even to another hospital."

"Why? What on earth have you got against her?"

"Nothing. Everything. I don't know. She's very beautiful. You must have noticed."

"And so I fire a girl because she's good-looking?"

"Don't deliberately be obtuse. Did you know Joe Saylor wants to marry her?"

"No. He's not good enough for her." As soon as he had spoken he wished he had bitten off his tongue before the words spilled out. Marcia did not fail to notice them.

"So-o-o." She dragged the monosyllable out meaningfully.

"Listen, Marcia, there's nothing, absolutely nothing, between Althea Jones and me, and you are out of your mind to suggest it."

"I wonder," said Marcia, still musingly, "does your vehemence betray you? But no matter. I believe you, Hal, and I want to believe you, but that nurse must go."

"But why? Why?" Hal had to know exactly what was in Marcia's thoughts. His conduct with Althea had been irreproachable save for that one incident known to only two persons in the world.

"Joe, for instance. Joe was making snide remarks about how cute you two looked on the dance floor."

"Joe!" It was a word of contempt.

"All right, Joe. But if Joe said it, noticed it, others did, too. And not only here—where there were several important people from the Hospital—but at the Hospital itself."

"It is unfair to transfer someone because of gossip or the possibility thereof. And I assure you there is nothing between that girl and me; no breath of scandal should touch her. It is disgusting."

He would have liked to tell her that indeed there was something between Althea and him, something electric, magnetic, something they had clearly perceived and had mutually agreed to stamp out, to stifle, all on their own recognizance, so to speak, and not because of the sneaky gossip of a Joe Saylor or others like him. But, how to tell

her this without further stirring suspicions already aroused? Better to leave the subject alone.

"However," he went on, "there is a curious coincidence here—"

"One moment," Marcia interrupted. "Tell me in a moment . . . . Our marriage, Hal, is not all it should be, we both know that. I don't think we should break it up, and, I gather, neither do you. But whatever happens, whatever is the truth, I will not have *anybody* hint my husband is running around with a nurse from his hospital. You have to get rid of that girl." She was more sad now than angry and sarcastic, as she had been before.

Hal kissed her on the forehead. It was a kiss of pity, pity for her and for themselves.

"I was going to say, Marcia, we have a curious coincidence here. I am going to see Althea Jones today—in a few minutes—and I am going to transfer her. Will you please remember, particularly if your friend Saylor says anything, that this is coincidence, coincidence pure and simple?"

"I don't care what it is," Marcia said, recovering her usual light manner, "coincidence, act of God, anything—*just so she goes.*"

Hal nodded and left the room.

"Okay, Althea, he'll see you now." Dr. Meikeljohn's shared secretary beamed. She liked this nurse for being so pretty and so neat, and she was a good nurse, too, conscientious and hard-working, the right kind of nurse for her Dr. Mike.

Althea rose from her waiting-room chair, where she had been sitting idly for about ten minutes (doctors don't provide you with magazines in their hospital offices; that

luxury is strictly for the private practice), and went into the office.

"Hello, Althea, sit down." Hal shook her hand cordially and impersonally and motioned her to the chair next to his desk. "As a matter of fact I wanted to see you, too. But first, what's on your mind?"

"Well, Dr. Mike, it's kind of personal and confidential," Althea began. She did not observe the flash of wary dismay that crossed his face. But his expression changed and became serious and attentive as she launched herself (for the third time) upon a recital of the plight facing the Bellamy sisters. She told the story and handed him her grandfather's letter.

He read it and stayed silent for a few moments. Althea could almost physically feel his thinking, as she could when he was operating. Then, his mind made up, he put the letter down and looked softly at his favorite nurse.

"I am glad you came to me, Althea. It was the right thing to do. Nurse Bellamy should have come to me directly; she shouldn't have gone to you. I thought all my nurses felt they could come to me when they had troubles."

"She's a little scared of you, Dr. Mike. She gets shy. She doesn't know I'm telling you. Perhaps I should have asked her."

"She needn't know. Just let me know in case you do tell her.

"Now, Althea," he said crisply and seriously—he was the surgeon-diagnostician now and was wasting no time—"in the first place I am very proud of you and pleased with you. Your concern in this case is just what I would have expected of you."

Althea noticed with a trace of amusement that he was completely professional, completely impersonal.

"I am prepared—perhaps I should say, my wife and I

are prepared—to give Nurse Ruth Bellamy the money required by this exigency. In truth, it does not need to be a large amount, and we can afford it—Marcia and her father have long had a fund set aside for just such personal emergencies. Bellamy does not have to know where the money comes from. When and if she is able to repay some of it, she can make checks payable to the Hospital, in care of me. You can tell her it came from a Hospital fund administered by me. I shall want from you or Bellamy an exact estimate of how much money will be needed and a statement of financial responsibilities (like the mother), debts, and so forth; also a report of any income aside from Bellamy's salary, such as the sister's salary. I am confident there will be no trouble in helping her out, and you can tell her so."

Althea put her head in her hands. She was not quite crying for happiness; she was closer to a prayer of thanks.

"I can't tell you, Dr. Mike . . ."

"Don't. Now, one thing further. I much prefer your grandparents' suggestion, and you may tell this to your friends. They sound like wonderful people, and Ruth Bellamy's sister should be happy there. I think it would be good for her to work in a small city and live on a farm. I needn't mention the good to the child. However, I can appreciate a diffidence about moving in with strangers, but in this case the girl may consider herself lucky that she has a choice.

"It is not often that we are given the privilege of bringing light into a life plunged in darkness. We, my wife and I [he was always meticulous about bringing Marcia into any conversation that had to do with money] are glad to be able to do it. This is cure and healing, too, you understand."

Althea was too moved to speak.

"Compose yourself, my dear," he said, lightly patting her hand, and he busied himself with papers on his desk in order to give her time to do so. Althea got a grip on herself, gave him a smile that might have been close to tears, and said, "Okay, Dr. Mike. You said you had something to say to me?"

"Fine, fine." He was referring to her recovery from emotion. "Let's go.

"What do you know, Althea, about open-heart surgery?"

Althea was taken aback. It was so unexpected a question —and from the director of Head and Neck!

"I know very little about it, Dr. Mike. I know they're doing it in a couple of hospitals here. There've been some articles in the newspapers. I haven't read any medical journals . . . ." She stopped inquiringly.

"You will," said the doctor, "or at least I hope you will. Here are some excerpts from medical papers, and here is a fairly good piece from a lay magazine. I'd read that one first to sort of get the feel of it." He picked up a large batch of clippings and stuffed them into a manila envelope.

"But why—" Althea began.

"For the time being I wish you would consider this a confidential matter. We don't boast about it, but you know we think we're the best hospital in the city; at any rate we certainly try to be. But we have not kept pace in Heart. At a meeting of the Directors a few weeks ago it was decided that we would go into open-heart surgery. Dr. —— (he named one of the most prominent surgeons of the Midwest) has agreed to come here and set up a department. He will bring a staff with him, doctors and nurses, but he will rely upon us for help, also. And eventually we will develop our own units from our own internes and our own nurses and student nurses. Also, I doubt whether

the doctor will come here fully staffed, and we want to be ready for that—as I believe I mentioned.

"The help and experience of all open-heart units in the country are ours, of course, for the asking. But as much as possible we want to do our own groundwork: we want to be skeptical in the best sense of the word; we want to accept nothing on faith, no matter how unimpeachable the source; we will make our own tests, find our own proofs. Perhaps we will discover new techniques, perhaps not. But in any case, whatever becomes our method of procedure, it will be adopted because we have previously tried every method we could discover and have decided that this particular one is in our estimation the very best."

It was a noble credo, and Althea was thrilled by it. But she was depressed, too, for now she knew what was coming.

"I firmly believe, Althea, and the Board believes with me, that you are our best surgical nurse. We would like you to thoroughly familiarize yourself with *everything* that has to do with open-heart surgery. We would like you to pass on your information and knowledge to other nurses in the hospital when the time comes and train them. This is a big and important job we have in mind for you.

"As I told you, we wish to keep this development in the Hospital's program confidential for the time being. For that reason I have arranged for you, or some other representative of the Hospital, to go to Philadelphia, where Dr. Slocum, an old friend of mine, is performing this operation. That way the news of our decision will reach New York a little later—not much, I guess, medical gossip being what it is. The reason for keeping this confidential, by the way, is simply that we want the announcement to come from the new doctor rather than from us. He is

in the process of severing his present connections, and a premature announcement might be embarrassing.

"Well, Althea, that's it, very roughly. Do you want to take on the job?"

Althea had taken an oath; and she was loyal to the Hospital—and to Dr. Mike.

"If you and the Hospital want me to take the job, I am ready—and very willing."

"The Hospital wants you to, Althea," he replied, leaving himself pointedly out of the answer.

"All right, then," she said, and rose. "What do I do?"

"You read the material I have given you. Early next week I'll have a long and detailed conference with you, and we'll get under way. Good luck to you, Althea; this is a big opportunity for you." He rose also and extended his hand.

"Dr. Mike," she said, as she took it, "I have a question to ask. Does this mean that I am out of Head and Neck for good, that I no longer will work with you?"

"Yes, Althea. It looks that way," he said very quietly.

"I am sorry."

"I am sorry, too."

Althea looked at him curiously. Had he engineered this as a maneuver for a personal reason, because he thought it would be better, safer, for them to be separated? Or was she exaggerating the entire situation, blowing a kiss into a full-bloomed affair because of the spiteful words of a jealous suitor? She looked him steadily in the eyes, and as steadily he returned her gaze. She could read absolutely no expression in his face.

She smiled swiftly, slipped out of the office, tossing a friendly "See you soon" to the gray-haired secretary, and walked slowly down the corridor toward the elevator. She felt dejected, but suddenly like a stab of sunlight another

thought returned. *Ruth!* The great, good, unbelievable news for Betty. She got in touch with the Hospital switchboard and asked where Ruth was stationed. She was off duty; she'd been excused for the day. Excused? Althea had a moment of worry, dismissed it, and dialed the number of Ruth's apartment.

"Darling," she trilled when Ruth answered, "I have good news for you, great news. May I come over?"

"You have good news?" Ruth's voice sounded flat, but Althea did not notice. "Yes, Althea, do come over."

Ruth and Betty lived in a tiny walk-up on Charles Street, down in Greenwich Village. The proper and speediest way to get there was by subway, but it seemed faster and more extravagant to Althea to take a taxi and this was a moment for swiftness and extravagance. The cab obligingly careened downtown and deposited Althea in front of their building. She rang and when the door buzzed open, ran up the two flights of stairs and pantingly embraced Ruth, who was waiting for her, framed in her open doorway.

"Darling," the joyous words tumbled out, "it's just unbelievable. Dr. Mike, I mean the Hospital, is ready to loan us some money and Granddaddy and Grandmummy want Betty and the boy to come to the country and— Oh, where is Betty? Get her! There's so much to tell."

"Betty," said Ruth, "committed suicide at five o'clock this morning."

"I put some coffee on when you called. I'll get it," Ruth said.

Ruth had cried very briefly after Althea's arrival. She was now numb, moving and reacting almost automatically, but Althea's news, the shattering realization of how bright the future might have been had Betty postponed her

desperate act a mere twenty-four hours, this had pierced her protective armor, and burning tears had flowed, brief though they were. Now she seemed composed again.

"Here is her note," she said. "You should read it. You're in it." All suicide notes, so final, so forlorn, are perforce much the same. Althea had never read one save in novels and, rarely, in newspapers, but she felt she had read this one before:

Darling little Sister,

When years from now you think of me, think of me kindly and with love. Now, try not to be too angry with me. I simply can't go on. Oh, I'm sure I could find another job or go back to the old one this fall, but I know it's not leading anywhere. I'll never get little Harry back; I'm a burden to everybody. I'm keeping you and Pete from getting married.

This is all for the best, for you and for little Harry. All I'm asking is that you tell him in later years that I did this for the best and that his mother was not a wicked woman. Tell him I did two good things in this world: I gave birth to him and I brought you up.

Please keep an eye on him, darling, in case he ever needs anything. But don't interfere with his guardians. They love him, and they have a right to his love. If he's all right, just leave him alone. But I'll feel better wherever I'm going if I know you're watching him from afar, so to speak.

Good-by, dear little Sister, and say good-by also to your friend Althea. I mention her here because in all these recent years she was the only person I met who I felt was a real friend. I'm sorry I couldn't get to know her better.

My love, dear, and give a kiss to my Harry when you see him,

Betty

P.S. Do you mind if I make a last little joke? A nurse's sister gets to learn a thing or two: these pills I'm taking won't hurt me, so you won't have to think of me as having had pain. There will be no mess; always was the tidy one, wasn't I? O my darling Sister, good-by.

The letter was dated, Althea reflected, the same day she had received the answer from her grandfather. If only she had— But she knew it was senseless to think along lanes such as this. The past cannot be recalled, and mourning will not change it. They must think of the future, Ruth and she—she of her new job in Philadelphia (should she take Ruth with her for a while? A change would be good for her), and Ruth of her marriage to Pete. Life goes on . . . .

Ruth, in her mind's eye, saw herself in the Third Avenue restaurant, the coffee cups on the white composition table. "Yes, yes," she had whispered to Pete, and she had kissed him. "We won't wait. We won't wait any longer."

Poor Betty, poor defeated Betty. She hadn't waited, either.

CHAPTER 8

ALTHEA TELEPHONED Dr. Meikeljohn at his home. She didn't like to do so, but it was an emergency. She had waited until ten thirty in the morning, which was the latest she could wait; she was due at Ruth's to help with funeral arrangements, and she did not want to speak to Dr. Mike in Ruth's presence. She was therefore calling from her own apartment, to which she had returned from Ruth's at one A.M., after the sedatives she had administered to Ruth had taken effect. Ruth had insisted she wanted to be alone, although Althea had offered to spend the night with her or have her use the daybed in her own apartment. The suave butler whom she remembered from the party answered and politely asked her to wait after she had given her name. It was Marcia who answered.

"My dear," Marcia purred, "how good to talk to you again. Hal and I were talking about you just the other day [how true, how true!], and I have not forgotten that we promised ourselves a talk we've never had. It's impossible, of course, to talk at one of those parties. But I do hope you had a good time; that Joe Saylor can be so amusing, but he's a good man—quite a catch, as our grandmothers used to say, and he's pretty far gone on you, my dear.

"Excuse my rattling, dear," she rattled on. "Hal is

in the shower—he loafs Saturdays when he can—and I'm just waiting for him to appear. But I wanted to talk to you anyhow. Hal tells me you're going to take on a different kind of duty. [It didn't take her long to learn, thought Althea.] Will it keep you out of the city? Joe won't like that.

"Oh, here's Hal now. I'll give him to you. I do hope it's nothing serious. We never have a Saturday without something happening, it seems.

"Althea, dear. Before Hal snatches this receiver away. He tells me you're off duty just now, and I want to see you—about you know what. Could you have tea with me Wednesday, say at five?"

Althea didn't want to and she didn't "know what," but she could think of no reason in the world for declining. Anyhow, she recognized the signs: if not Wednesday, Thursday; if not Thursday, Friday.

"I'd love to," she said, and she realized that since Marcia had picked up the telephone, these were the first words she had been able to speak. Marcia had a way of monopolizing the conversation when she was with Althea; Althea wondered why. Marcia, too, was aware of it but found she couldn't help it. She was not at ease with Althea. "Wednesday, where?"

"Let's meet at the Plaza in the Palm Court. It's so wonderful in the summer. All those divine South Americans. And if we don't want tea, we'll have cocktails. Okay? Fine. Here's Hal. He's still dripping. It's Althea Jones, dear," she said sweetly, handing him the instrument.

"What are you being so cozy about?" said Hal irritatedly, and then briskly: "Althea? Hi. What's the matter?"

Althea had called Hal Meikeljohn because he had to know what had happened. Aside from the personal in-

terest he had shown in the case, there was the Hospital to be considered. Betty was the sister of a nurse at the Hospital, and the newspapers would be sure to mention it; the Hospital was very careful about any publicity concerning it, and insofar as it was possible, tried to control it. This would be a story that the Hospital publicity staff would want played down. And in the natural course of events, poor Betty having all her life been insignificant from a news viewpoint, the story would be a minor, unnoticed one. But let one of the sob reporters from one of the evening papers get Ruth to tell the story entire—the baby who might have been illegitimate, the dismissal from the job at the department store, the guardians of little Harry, and the deadline about financial responsibility . . . . Althea could see it: the somewhat slipping newspaper starting a fund to "bring this baby the education his guardians cannot quite afford and his mother could not give him," the well-meaning dollars pouring in and every day the "record so far" portrayed by the picture of a thermometer on the front page and meanwhile the circulation manager chuckling because he had beat the summer doldrums for a while anyhow, and the advertising manager launching an institutional campaign on the theme that depth was important but *constant* depth was the element that counted. And the public garbling the story so that instead of the poor mother being the sister of a nurse, she was the nurse herself: "Did you hear that one of the nurses at the Hospital committed suicide? She had an illegitimate baby. You know those nurses, so bossy, so proper-looking. There's more goes on there than you know about." Althea knew how these stories could spread, how dangerous and unfair they could be, and for this reason alone she had to speak to Dr. Mike. He would know

what to do; he would assign somebody from Publicity to help take care of Ruth and unobtrusively and gently guide her in answers to reporters.

And Dr. Mike did know what to do.

"It's a tragic story," he said, after Althea had finished her narrative. "No, it's not really tragic; it's stupid, I think. She should not have done it. Her folly is heightened by the fact that she was in the clear, but it remains folly. She could have borrowed money if she wished, and there was the offer from your grandparents. If she had waited a day or two, everything would have been all right. I think it is more foolishness than tragedy.

"Forgive me, Althea. It is a habit we surgeons get—to philosophize. We see so much of life and death, so much of death . . . ."

Hal Meikeljohn was talking to himself. A surgeon can work like a mechanic; a human body can be treated and operated upon as impersonally as an automobile body. But there is more to the human body—the self-thinking? the soul?—and the surgeon inevitably thinks of that, too.

He rallied to reality.

"All right, Althea. Excuse me for wandering. I'll get in touch with someone at Publicity to help look after things. I suppose you'll be with Bellamy, too?"

"Yes, Doctor, and I'd like to—"

"Good," he broke in. "Stay with her today and tomorrow. I don't think she'll be bothered by reporters, but you can never tell. Anyhow, Publicity can also help about interment, certificates, papers to be signed, and so forth. I doubt that you'll need to, but feel free to call me anytime. And, oh yes, I am operating Monday. I want Nurse Bellamy at the hospital at seven. I am not counting on you. You are still officially on leave, but I'll be talking to you

next week about your new duties and your trip to Philadelphia."

"But, Doctor, I was wondering, do you want me to go to Philadelphia right away? I thought I'd like to take Ruth away for a week or so—probably to the farm upstate. She's been through an awful lot, and it's not really over yet. The rest and the country air, you know, would do her a lot of good."

"The rest and the country air be damned." Althea almost jumped at his unexpected vehemence. "I said I wanted her at the hospital at seven A.M., and that's where I want her. Work is the way to get over these things, work and concentration on a job. Not sitting on your bucolic fanny and staring at your bucolic umbilicus, and thinking about what's happened and getting sorry for yourself.

"And as for you, young lady, I don't want you loafing around a farm, either. You haven't read those papers yet? No? Well, I can understand that. But you can read them over the week-end. You think you're going to be busy, but that's where you're wrong. You'll be very busy in spurts, but most of the time you'll just be sitting around trying to make conversation. Spend that time usefully and read the material I gave you. I'll want to talk to you the middle of next week, and I want you to have read that material when I see you.

"Well, I guess that's the end of the lecture. Please give Ruth my sympathies. I don't believe I will call her; she has enough to do without my butting in. And call me if there's something you and Publicity can't handle. Good-by. See you next week."

Marcia thought:

Maybe he doesn't know it, but he speaks too much to that girl. He is intimate even when he is impersonal. She's

got to go to another hospital; as a matter of fact she can go to hell so far as I care. To hell or to Joe Saylor? Maybe they would be the same thing. What is it about this girl that makes me so uncomfortable, so bitchy? Why is there no guilt in that beautiful, serene, gold-framed face? Can it be innocence? But in that case mine would be the sin of sin itself: jealousy, defamation, conniving. . . .

Marcia liked not what she thought.

Althea thought:

When he's Dr. Hal Meikeljohn of the Hospital there's no fooling around. You step lively and do what he says, and he doesn't know whether you're a blonde or a brunette—you're a nurse, a pair of hands, and maybe, if you're lucky, some brains. So, yes sir, Dr. Mike, I'm off to Ruth's as you suggest, and I'll see to it she's in the op room Monday. And yes sir, Dr. Mike, I'm taking your papers, and I'll have read them by tonight if you want to call me.

Yes sir, Dr. Mike. . . .

Althea had expected from the Hospital's publicity department a brash, knowledgeable young man, something like publicity men in the movies. Instead she found an amiable middle-aged woman who looked and acted somewhat like Shirley Booth. So competent and understanding was this woman that Althea found herself almost in the way and went home from Ruth's to take a rest. "Call me, dear, if you want anything. I can be right over in a minute, you know." The familiar words of the familiar commiserator—postponing what had to be faced. Which was that Ruth's sorrow was a personal sorrow, in which nobody could share completely and which she had to live with for a requisite span of time until she herself could say, "It is over, it is past." But for all the solitariness of grief, there

was the comfort of knowing that there were other loved ones about her. Althea was there; all she had to do was call her. Pete was there—no, Pete was here.

Pete had said (after Althea had gone) to the woman who looked like Shirley Booth, "Look, I think we've got everything under control now. If you want to go home now, I can take care of things here. It's okay, you know. Ruth and I are getting married. I'm getting a promotion."

The two greatest things in the world: marriage and promotion. Shirley Booth went—and left them alone.

Ruth, exhausted, slept.

Pete, happy because he was near her and a help to her, and as uncomfortable as ever he had been in his life, dozed all night in an understuffed wing chair.

CHAPTER 9

"HERE," Dr. Mike had said, "is a fairly good piece from a lay magazine. I'd read that one first. . . ."

Althea was in her little sitting room, a door open onto her tiny city yard, golden-lit now by a setting sun. This is the surgery they want me to know about, she thought; all right, here goes.

"About six o'clock the evening before," Althea read, "the engineers come into the still and empty operating room and begin fiddling with the machines and the doctors come in, too, and make a joke and they are all waiting for

tomorrow morning and they are all nervous and they will swear they are not. Tomorrow there is to be an operation, and whether this will be their first or their hundredth, the tension will be as tight. For this, as the chief surgeon put it, is 'major-league stuff.'"

So far, so good, Althea thought, a little smug, a little ahead of the writer. *And aren't we the same way about our own operations; aren't* all *of us the same way about* all *operations?* But she liked the familiar image the writer had evoked and went on.

"I first heard about the operation while I was a patient in the new American Hospital, one of the best known of the Midwest institutions. I was recuperating from a minor incision. My nurse spoke about the operation first, and then it was mentioned by an orderly with whom I had struck up one of those good and sudden comradeships that characterize a hospital convalescence."

I miss the Hospital already; I wish I were back at work. Even in Philadelphia, if that must be. The mention of the orderly did it. Izzy, the orderly, our dear friend. No job too much trouble for him; you *had the trouble, getting him to go home and get rest. But the one thing Izzy had to do was eat. "When you've been in Dachau," Izzy said, "and you'e gotten out, you eat!" Izzy ate; when a tray was returned from a patient's room, Izzy was there. But he managed to stay careful, according to his lights. He didn't like to filch from a tray that might, in his* materia medica, *have come from a contagious patient. "Look," he would say to the nurses in the corridor, "a* clean *sandwich!" I miss Izzy . . . . I miss the Hospital . . . .*

"I paid little heed at first," the article went on, "though somewhat resenting the hospital's lack of concentration upon me, for there is nothing more egocentric than a patient, and a thought directed to anyone other than your-

self, no matter how critical that condition and how minor your own, seems an affront. But soon I began to feel a pulse in the hospital itself. The entire building had the operation on its mind: they were talking about it in the corridors and in the coffee shop; the cleaning women knew about it. I was somehow reminded of the electricity of a college campus on the day of the big game. There was the same concern and feeling of participation with the team by persons who were not on the team itself . . . .

"There was cause for excitement. The operation was not new to surgery, but it was new to this particular hospital. It is known as an open-heart operation. . . ."

This is it—in "lay terms."

"It consists of cutting off the normal flow of blood into a faulty heart while simultaneously manning a machine that, substituting for the heart, pumps new blood through the veins and air through the lungs. While this artificial pumping and respiration are at work, the real heart is removed, drained of blood; dry, it can be examined and repaired.

"The repairs are made, usually by means of swift and accurate sewing, perhaps by grafting, and the heart is refitted into the body: it is reattached to its normal 'pipes,' its sources of living. A small electric jolt gets it going again—we hope—and slowly, steadily, it takes over from the artificial pump.

"It is one of the most delicate operations performed today and surely one of the most demanding of the surgeons. Doctors who have participated in this operation have declared that the 'moment of truth' when the real heart takes over—or fails to take over—from the artificial heart is as agonizing an instant of suspense as ever they expect (or want) to experience."

Yes, I know something of this. Is the patient truly alive

or is he dead when the heart is in the hands of another person and the mechanical something makes the body behave as if it were live and sensate? I remember now: this operation needs extremely light anesthesia, and it is quite possible that a patient deprived of the functions of his own heart, whose heart might indeed be irreparably sundered (dead?), might still through mechanical means respond to questions. . . . But this is possibly nothing I should think of now. It is something for Dr. Mike and the others on the staff. . . .

"It was only twenty-five years ago that one of the most respected figures in surgery said that the 'heart is an organ forever occluded from the surgeon's hand.' Today these operations are regular occurrences at hospitals in New York; Brooklyn; Philadelphia; Minneapolis; Rochester, Minnesota; Rochester, New York; and elsewhere.

"How did this come about, and how was this particular rash prophecy—since all prophecies are rash—put to the lie? One answer lies in the simple, beautiful credo of one of the greatest doctors of our country. 'Nothing,' he stated, 'is impossible!'

"Another rests in the extraordinary development of surgical instrumentation, in the tendency of doctors to specialize so that they become complete experts in their chosen field rather than scattering their talents over half a dozen, and in a virtue and necessity that has resulted from that specialization: an amazingly smooth-working teamwork."

As we are a team . . . as we have been with Dr. Mike. . . .

"To history," she read on, "now must belong the image of the virtuoso surgeon single-handedly producing a miracle. Rather, we must think of a major operation like this as being performed by a brilliant team, brilliantly led. Dr.

———, for instance, is the leader of his hospital's team and its chief surgeon. But it is not he who makes the first incision. This job is that of the second-in-command, who cuts first in the groin, where he attaches catheters to return blood to the patient. He then moves across the operating table and stands opposite the chief surgeon, who now takes over the principal work. There are five assistants at the table and two nurses at the instruments. The operation may take from six to twelve hours, the crux—the actual manipulation of the heart—from a half hour to an hour. There are no fewer than fifteen persons actively at work in the operating room: the surgeons, the anesthetists, the doctors and engineers watching the recording machines (which indicate the brain waves, the blood count, etc.), and the nurses. On any of these persons the life of the patient may depend, and yet some of them never see the patient once the operation has begun. Their eyes are fixed on those recording machines, observing the weird flowing, jumping lines that run from left to right on the gauges and tell them what is happening internally to the patient's body, tell them what the surgeons' human eyes cannot see. These monitors, incidentally, are very little different from those used at Cape Canaveral, Florida, to take the pulses and temperatures of the various satellites we have and have not launched. The doctors watch these intently, intoning their readings, which almost subconsciously the chief surgeon and his assistants assimilate. But let the lines show a deviation and the watcher speaks sharply. If something is wrong, say, with the brain waves, it probably means that blood is not flowing through. The doctors have three minutes to put that in order—or else. Three minutes—not a second more. They have no more grace of time."

The article then became more technical, and spent considerable space on the experiments made on animals and the knowledge gained therefrom that made it a more than reasonable risk to operate on human beings. "We would never," one of the doctors was quoted as saying, "have dared—indeed it would have been criminal—to operate on a human being without the knowledge and skill gained from these experiments. Every time we operate on an animal we learn something; it may be something that will not show up until later and then perhaps indirectly, so to speak—like a new, closer way of working in concert with the other surgeons."

How well Althea knew the truth of this. The importance of the animal laboratories had been drilled into her when she had been a student, and yet many of her close friends were antivivisectionists and still proclaimed to find cruelty in what was, insofar as possible, a humane method of saving human lives. "We take care of our dogs," another doctor said, "exactly as we do our human patients. Our purpose is to keep them alive."

The sun was now sinking fast, and Althea turned on the electric light. She finished the so-called lay article, prepared to read the clippings from medical journals Dr. Mike had given her. She felt a wonderful tingling sense of anticipation; she would miss Dr. Mike and the familiar operations, but she was advancing into new things. A new department in the Hospital and she would be a part of it —even an important part! She was fundamentally grateful to Dr. Mike for having chosen her; it was characteristic of her modesty that she did not consider that it was her excellent past record that had dictated the choice.

She would miss working with Dr. Mike. But then the thought came: had she really ceased working with him? He had sounded as if he were intimately connected with

this new project. Yet he should not be, since it was outside his field. Then came the idea and the certainty that Dr. Mike had been put on the Board of Directors. That was it, of course. She felt a warm glow of pride in him.

The telephone shattered the silence of the little room. It would surely be Ruth.

But it was Joe.

"Althea, darling," he said, in a quiet, sober voice, "I must see you. I think things were a little frenzied the other night, and I am sorry. I always seem to be high when I propose to you, but I'm down low now and I wish you'd see me. There's a little Italian restaurant—"

"No, Joe. I can't go out tonight. In a few moments I'm going to see a friend who has—ah, had a loss—"

"I heard about that from Marcia. A dreadful shock to you. I feel awful about it, too. I must know. *If I had said, 'Yes, I will lend her money,' then it wouldn't have happened, would it?*"

How could she answer that? On the face of it, if Joe had said yes (or—an awful thought, too—if she herself had said yes to Joe, yes, she would marry him), then Betty would have had the news on the morrow and she might not have taken the pills. She might not—but still she might have. She might have thought the loan only a putting off of the inevitable—the loss to others of her child (for the guardians might legally have held that borrowing money was not evidence that the mother could support the boy). Betty might have killed herself no matter what Joe or Althea or Dr. Mike or Grandfather Jones were willing to do.

"Who can answer a question like that?" she pursued her thought aloud. "Who knows whether you or I or anyone could have done anything, prevented anything?

"I know this, Joe. I can appreciate that you are miserable over the whole affair, but you must put it out of your

mind. This is something that's happened and that is past. The living must go on living. We have things to do.

"Good night, Joe, and don't worry. No, I will not go out tonight. No, I don't know when I'll see you again. Yes, you may call me when you want. Good night." And she hung up gently.

Even if you wanted to, how did you stop somebody from picking up a telephone and calling you? She no longer felt angry or disgusted with Joe. She felt sorry for him.

The small string orchestra was playing (by request) Chaminade's "The Flatterers." The place was crowded, mostly with ladies who looked eminently respectable. There were some of the South Americans Marcia had mentioned, and they were beautifully dressed and looked overwhelmingly rich. Althea had no trouble spotting Marcia. She was in a corner in a crushed-raspberry (her favorite color) cocktail dress, and she had resolutely ordered tea. As a captain led Althea to the table, a waiter deposited on it a plate of watercress sandwiches. The battlefield was ready for combat.

The amenities were observed, and then Marcia, wasting little time, said, "Well, Althea, surely you know why I wanted us to meet?"

Althea had an idea, of course, and she resented it. But she found to her surprise that the stress of the last few days seemed to have drained her; she was too tired to discuss, to argue or fight over, matters that were probably no concern of Marcia's. She didn't care and she would have liked to so declare, but she gave a wisp of a smile and said, "I don't know. You rather told me what you had in mind on the telephone Saturday. Still . . . "

"It's about Joe, Althea. Do you love him?"

"No."

"That's rather final. I thought you hadn't completely made up your mind. I hadn't expected so definite an answer."

"The answer is no. And, Marcia," Althea said, her voice well modulated, "without being impolite but with all due respect to the privileges of privacy, what concern is it of yours?"

Marcia was ready with her answer.

"I like Joe. He asked me to speak to you in his behalf. I didn't ask for it."

"Very well. It is kind of you, I am sure. But can't we consider that we have now had our discussion? What good can this kind of talk do? Surely I know Joe as well as you; you have just met him. Surely you can't change my mind about something so intensely personal as my decision whether or not to marry him. Why not enjoy our tea, drop the subject, and stop wasting time?"

"The decision is yours of course, but I would like to tell you a few things about Joe that perhaps you have not thought of. Very often we are most blind to the persons most close to us.

"I know that Joe may seem flighty to so serious a girl as you"—she made being serious sound like a social defect —"but fundamentally he is a good, hard-working man, successful and attractive. I believe he is genuinely in love with you, and I believe you are just the type of girl he needs—someone to steady him down, to guide him, to be an anchor for him.

"And I believe if you don't love him now, you will in time. If you'd give him a chance to show those wonderful qualities of his, if— Oh, I don't know, Althea, *how can you turn down a man like Joe?*" Marcia was really puzzled by this. She could not understand how a trained nurse from

some unheard-of upstate town, even if she had some money of her own (as she gathered Althea had), could even hesitate about accepting a proposal from Joseph Saylor III.

"I can very easily," Althea replied evenly. "I don't love Joe, and I never will. I have been fond of him, and I dare say I will be again. When I first met him I was frankly dazzled by him and flattered. But I'm not the girl for Joe."

"I tell you you are wrong."

"And I tell you I am not. And I must tell you again it is *my* business. But since you seem so eager to plead Joe's cause, have you ever considered that Joe really doesn't love me, really doesn't want to marry me, but only thinks he does because I've said no to him? Joe is a spoiled child. He is not used to not having his own way. He thinks he wants me desperately only because he can't have me. I do not believe his emotion sincere, and I do not believe it will last."

This thought was not new to Marcia. She suspected Althea was right. And so she came abruptly to the second subject she wished to discuss. "Althea," she said almost casually, "are you in love with my husband?"

Althea flushed with anger, not with embarrassment.

"I suppose," she said, instead of answering, "that Joe put you up to asking that also?"

"And why do you say that?" asked Marcia icily.

"He accused me of the same thing the night of your party. And since you two have become such soulmates, it figures—to coin a phrase."

Althea paused, took a deep breath, and said in low, slow tones, almost as if she were a judge delivering a sentence:

"Mrs. Meikeljohn, I think we will call an end to your prying into my private affairs. I will say no, I am not in love with your husband. I suppose if you suspected so,

you, as his wife, had a right to ask. And so I tell you, frankly no.

"And now I will thank you and Joe to keep out of my private affairs. If you have to create a scandal, look for it in the lives of some of the fancy friends that glittered at your party. Let me alone, and let me do my work. Or do you want to interfere with that, too?"

"What can you do but deny it? Even if it's true. Althea"—Marcia was leaning across the table and looking warmly at her companion, winningly, confidingly, and persuasively—"who would blame you? Certainly not I, his wife. I know his magnetism, his power. Who would blame you if you fell in love, involuntarily, I am sure, with the boss you see and, I know, admire, every day? But Althea, stop it. Let him alone."

Althea felt she was screaming silently; she could almost feel in her ears the throb of that whistle pitched so high that dogs can hear it but humans cannot.

"Stop what? Let who alone? *You* stop it; *you* let me alone."

"Yes, it is possible." Marcia was now reflective. "It is possible that you love him or, I should say, are in love—infatuated, rather—with him and do not know it. But you should know it, should diagnose it [as I have and Joe has, and Joe was right: I have only to look at you, dear, to know—absolutely]. Please, Althea, do not think I do not understand. As one woman to another, I understand.

"But as one woman to another, Althea, give up thinking of my husband. I will not hide from you that our marriage is not all it should be. But it has never been threatened by another woman, and I am not going to have it threatened that way now!

"*You stop thinking of Hal Meikeljohn.* He is an innocent, and I shall not let him be beguiled by your own fake

innocent, ethereal looks. You know what you're doing. I see it now.

"You don't want Joe Saylor. You want something better: Hal Meikeljohn, who will one day be the head of the whole Hospital. You want to be the nurse married to that man."

Marcia's voice was rising as she worked herself up (entirely against her best judgment and her desire), and Althea gazed anxiously about her. But the tables near them were deserted; they were probably not overheard. What a morsel for a gossip columnist if he could hear Dr. Meikeljohn's wife speaking thus to one of her husband's nurses! Dr. Mike, who had been so eager to send someone from Publicity to Ruth Bellamy so that nothing harmful to the Hospital should be passed on to the press, should have someone from that same department at the fashionable Plaza Hotel guarding his own fashionable wife from speaking out of turn! The thought made Althea smile in spite of herself, and Marcia quite naturally misinterpreted the expression.

"Why are you smiling, Althea? Are you that confident that you have taken Hal away from me?"

There was something in the way the question was put that explained much to Althea. The ring of Marcia's voice, the tone of it, exclaimed that she wanted no possession of hers taken away until she herself wanted to be divested of it, that she no longer had love or desire for Hal but felt that "appearances" must be kept. She might leave Hal, but Hal must never be allowed to cause her to lose face by leaving her.

Althea understood, very suddenly, this torture in Marcia, this uncertainty and this cupidity.

And at the same moment she realized with a frightened pang that what Marcia was saying was true: of course she

was in love with Dr. Mike. She should have known it all along. But Dr. Mike, she vowed, would never know it, and she would see to it she got over it, *quickly*, and now Marcia must be comforted and soothed.

Oh, I mean so little harm, she thought. *You have him. Can you not take care of him? You cannot give me, like an ornament from a gift shop, to Joe Saylor, the gilded Joe, just to keep me out of the way. I* am *out of the way, and if you lose Hal, as I fear you must, it will be to someone else; I will not be there. I am not a rival, Marcia Olmsted Meikeljohn. I am a woman who now knows she loves your husband but who wants to help you to keep him and make him happy. I am not a rival, Marcia Olmsted Meikeljohn. I want your husband to be happy. I want him to do his work undisturbed. . . .*

"You think a great deal, Miss Jones." Marcia's voice was purring and dangerous. "Have you thought enough?"

Althea looked wildly about her. A gracious hotel, an innocuous room where tea was served to slightly bored but harmless persons, an orchestra now playing "Selections from Jerome Kern"—graciousness and good breeding everywhere, and at this table, so out of place in spirit she wondered that it was not noticeable to everyone in the place, torment, anguish.

"Listen to me, Marcia Meikeljohn. I have no aspirations to marry Dr. Mike; I never thought of it until just this moment when you put it in my mind." She would tell the truth to Marcia; she would not lie to her. But she did not have to tell the whole truth: she would not tell Marcia that it was she herself, Marcia, who had made her realize she was really in love.

"Why don't you let me alone?" Althea went on. "All I want to do is my job. And incidentally, I'm not going to be working in Head and Neck any more, anyhow."

"I know that. And it doesn't make any difference. You are still at the same hospital. And Hal has been made a director and must concern himself with all departments, including Open Heart.

"You see," she went on smugly, "Hal tells me, his wife, things, too."

"Oh, cut it out." Althea was exasperated to the point of tears. "I've told you I have no designs on your husband. Can't you see I am telling the truth?"

"You'd better be, Althea Jones. You know I am in a position to have you fired."

"You are a stupid woman. It just amazes me that Marcia Meikeljohn should be a stupid woman. If your husband were in love with another woman and wanted to see her, what difference would it make whether she worked in the same hospital or not? Could he not see her just as well any other place? Or any other city?" She wished she had not said that, but went on after only a momentary pause. "Don't you think that while you were talking I have thought of resigning from the Hospital? The only reason I am not is that I have been entrusted with a big job, an exciting job, and I want to do it.

"But I don't care if you have me fired. Perhaps, after all, it would be for the best. Working someplace else, I would never have to be reminded of you. Do it, by all means, if firing me would give you satisfaction. You don't seem to have much of it in your life."

Althea rose, bowed mockingly and smiling, and walked away, erect and sedate, through the little alleyways formed by the little tea tables. Marcia, still seated and immobile, followed her with her eyes. She had been defeated; she had failed to cow a woman whom she thought she could handle with ease; she had indeed been stupid, and it was this very woman who had so labeled her. She had been

stupid in suggesting to Althea a romance with her own husband; instead of putting a stop to it, she might have engendered it.

For one of the few times in her life Marcia was at a loss. Ordinarily she could go to her father for assistance. But this time she did not wish to do so. She would not admit to her father, who so trusted and admired her, that she could have been so foolish and impetuous. Joe Saylor had talked her into this. She would get hold of that Joe. Let him handle his own affairs and not bother her! But she felt a need of Joe; she wanted to be at ease with his great talent and his great superficiality. Althea was too damnably noble. The "noble" nurse, the "dedicated" doctor. Right now she felt shallow and inadequate. If she were a drunkard, it came to her, this would be the time she would call for one drink, and another . . .

She waved to a waiter, got him finally *(How long they take!)* to give her the check, paid it, and walked directly and purposefully to one of the telephone booths near the hotel's huge reception desk. Usually there was an operator to take and place calls, but this evening there was no one on duty. Marcia was relieved. She called home first. It was as she had expected; Hal would be late—do not wait supper—ten o'clock, no later—

"Cancel dinner," she said to the maid.

She would eat some place alone if she had to.

She telephoned Joe.

CHAPTER 10

THE CAR was speeding, speeding, SPEEDING, on the New Jersey Turnpike, bound for Philadelphia from New York. It was a red Thunderbird, swift, powerful, as lightly and easily handled as a rapier. It was a bold fireman's red. Red—the color for Marcia. For her dresses. Her rubies. Her blood.

Defeated and unhappy, she had left (been left by, is more accurate) Althea at the Plaza that afternoon, and Joe had answered her telephone call. No, he could not join her, but yes, she could join him. There were Mimi and Nicky Murphy, Jig and Henrietta, and they were going to a screening at Twentieth-Century-Fox, which was way all gone on the West Side, and then they were going to eat someplace and go to the Vanguard, where there was a new singer who accompanied herself on an Irish lute. So how about meeting them, and they could ditch them after the Vanguard and—

"Oh no, oh no," she had said. "Not tonight. I'll see you tomorrow."

She could not efface the memory of those grave, gray eyes. She could not have borne to see them accusing her while she was at the Vanguard, at a night club. Althea

had contrived to make her feel ashamed, and Marcia did not like the feeling. Her resentment grew as she had a sandwich and a glass of milk at a counter restaurant. That girl was becoming an obsession with her. Why hadn't she accepted Joe's invitation? Why was she eating alone in this crummy place? Why was she letting this girl affect her life? She had gone home in an ugly mood, which had become uglier when Hal had come in at ten o'clock, as he had promised. It was then she had the scene with him.

"Hal," she said, quickly, abruptly, as soon as he walked into the library, where she had been sitting for a couple of hours looking at an opened book upon her lap and never once turned a page. "I don't like that girl Althea Jones. I think she means trouble for us. I want you to get rid of her."

It would not be exact to say that Hal was completely surprised at this outburst. Marcia had been building up to it, and it had caused concern in Hal. For the kiss in his office (was this, he had thought with his analytic mind, his diagnostic approach, was this a *stolen* kiss?) had told him something: he wanted to be with this girl; he wanted to be with her always. But he had signed another contract and he would keep it. *Remember your favorite quotation from Abraham Lincoln: "If you have made a bad bargain, hug it the tighter." Remember this, and try to remember the moments of rapture: that first complete kiss on a still sun-heated dune by the lazy Atlantic, that first dance, that first . . . Recapture rapture. And if you cannot, be anyway faithful to your wife. As you are to your oath.*

He decided to be honest. No evasions. Marcia was the wife of a doctor; she knew the Hospital; she knew truth unadorned.

"I will not get rid of Althea Jones," he said solemnly, for he knew that much was involved in this, much more than what Marcia was proposing. The Hospital was involved; that was more important than a jealousy of Marcia's.

"I think we have hit a terrible spot in our lives," he said, hearing the words come from himself rather than speaking them. "I'll tell you this. I do think I could be in love with Althea, as you have been suggesting these past weeks. . . ."

The car was speeding; it was past seventy now.

"But I will never leave you.

"Marcia, you are a lonely, unhappy girl. You cannot make a man happy.

"But we have something else. We have agreed to something, perhaps not in so many words, but an agreement is there. It is the Hospital. We—you and I—are going to stay together and take care of that hospital. It is like the child we have never had. I want the best to be given to that hospital, and Althea Jones is important to the Hospital and I want her there.

"Nurse Jones can get a top position with any hospital in the country. We want her with us. *I* want her, Marcia, as a nurse—not in any other guise. I am a doctor, she is a nurse. That is all."

But Marcia knew there was more than this. She also knew that Hal did not want to be in love with Althea and that he was fighting it in the honorable way that was his. She realized with a wisdom possibly denied the principals of this drama that these two were victims of a possible tragedy, as blameless, in a way, as Tristan and Isolde, who

unknowingly drank a love potion and loved each other thereafter beyond control.

Althea was threatening the marriage.

By that very threat, she might be saving it.

The Hospital came first with Hal. But second must be Marcia, not Althea.

"I am sure that is all, Hal," she said quietly and sweetly, but never had an Indian stalked for a scalp with such deadly and purposeful intensity. "I still think she can ornament a hospital other than ours. No man, you like to say, is indispensable. And I shall apply this to a woman.

"Whether or not you know it, that blond beauty is doing you harm, and I want her out of the Hospital. She goes. And that is final."

The issue was joined. Hal had the feeling he was playing a part on an unreal stage in an unreal theater. Marcia was practically throwing him into the arms of Althea. (Would they accept him? he wondered.) But this was not a personal matter. He would yield to Marcia so far as Althea *in persona* was concerned. But so far as Althea was a nurse and an important part of a new and important development of the Hospital—no; he could not, indeed should not.

The argument lasted long into the night. There was, of course, no solution.

Their thrusts and parries were pathetic. Each was trying for what in their picnic days would have been called a "get together," but each had a salient not to be yielded. Hal wanted Althea as a nurse, but no longer could he deny that he wanted her as a woman. But this he could control; this was something within his grasp. Emotions, reflexes—any doctor would know they could be conditioned. Althea was a nurse, and that was that. Please, God, tell Marcia to get off the subject.

And Marcia—poor, gilded Marcia! She knew she was headed for a doom, but she could not stop her way. She was the sparrow hypnotized by the snake. She did not want to do what she was doing. But she was fascinated. She brought up the name of Althea like the toll of a bell. She was goading her husband into something he had not himself recognized. She was making him know that he loved Althea.

She was a reluctant catalyst.

She was forcing him into a decision. Between two women.

But that night, as they quarreled fretfully, there was no decision, no solution, no agreement. Only bitter despair and acrimony.

The speedometer went up to eighty, and she eased it back to seventy-five. And there was nobody in the rear mirror.

Hal, oh Hal, oh Hal, she thought, *what have I done to you and to myself? So innocent you were when I plucked you like a grape at that silly dinner party on Long Island.*

I said the other night when we were quarreling that Althea could ornament another hospital as well as ours. A good word that—ornament.

That's what I wanted you for, Hal, if only I had known it. I wanted you as an ornament for me. The bright young doctor, the future head of the Hospital, the faithful, bright young doctor, the damned *doctor who is in love with his nurse. I did all this, and I don't know what I am trying to undo.*

Way down the highway, balling along at fifty-sixty

miles an hour, was a truck. Two miles? Three miles away? From where Marcia absently noticed it, it was the size of a playing card. It was to loom larger.

"She's perfectly right about you," she had said to Joe—had it been only this morning? She had asked him to the house for luncheon; Hal was in Philadelphia on the heart business. "She says you want her only because she refused you. And you can't take a refusal because you're spoiled."

"You're spoiled, too, Marcia. That's why we get along so well."

"Is it true, Joe? About Althea?"

"All right, I'll level with you. I think it is. I think I don't want to pursue this thing—or her—any more. She is too serious and too noble for me.

"I think I did react the way you say," he went on. "I think I did exaggerate because something I thought I had was denied me.

"So that's what I think. But I'll tell you something else. I never had a chance. Nobody's got a chance with Althea but your own Hal."

"You're a liar."

"Where is Hal today?"

"In Philadelphia."

"Where is Althea Jones?"

A hesitation, and then the answer: "In Philadelphia."

"And has Hal"—Joe was merciless—"telephoned and said he had to spend the night in Philadelphia? That he had to have dinner with Dr. So-and-so and there was a meeting in the morning so he would have to go back to Philly anyhow. Hasn't he telephoned that message?"

"Yes, he has." And then betraying herself, she added, "And it was true. I checked the Hospital here."

"Marcia. You're a fool. I'm not trying to break up your marriage. I'm trying to save it. Go to Philadelphia this afternoon and see what kind of meeting Hal is having.

"Go break this thing up. I don't like it any more than you do. I don't like to be made a fool of, and I don't like you to be made one, either. Go smash that damned candle-lit dinner they'll have tonight. Smash it for me. And for you!"

"I will. I will. But if you're not telling the truth, watch out, Joseph, the elegant, Saylor the Third."

She rang a bell. "Have the Thunderbird here in a half hour," she said to the answering butler. "And we'll have the sandwiches served here. And please bring another shaker of Martinis."

"I'm not trying to break up your marriage. I'm trying to save it." That's what he had said, but she should not have heeded him. She should not have ordered the second shaker of Martinis, nor the third. She should not have ordered the Thunderbird. She should not be speeding on this road. NOW she saw, as she knew she would, a cop in her rear-view mirror, and NOW she would just let him try and catch her. She had the idea. A sudden turn on a dirt road to the right, the way they did it in the movies, and the cop would pass her. And even if Althea and Hal were not having an affair, even if they were not having dinner, what was she, Marcia, doing, proving? If they're in love, they're in love. If I could be in love . . . If that cop who seems to be gaining . . .

And now the truck that had been a small playing card was huge, a behemoth, bearing down upon her. Only it was she who had turned toward it, unaccountably veering to her left. She had the sight of the driver's astonished and

frightened face, the last thing she saw in life, as she overcompensated with a quick turn to the right and hit an embankment, which flipped the car over like one of those playing cards she had been visualizing. She was pinned beneath; the front wheels spun idly in the unaccustomed air, white-walled tires, of course. Marcia was dead.

CHAPTER 11

THE NEWS REACHED Hal in Philadelphia where he was staying with his doctor friend. He had not seen Althea, though he knew of course that she was in the city. Marcia, had she finished her trip, would have found nothing amiss, nothing dishonorable. Nobody but Joe ever knew what had prompted her mad ride, and Joe never told anyone. Stricken with guilt, he went into virtual hiding for about a year. He never made an attempt to see Althea again.

As for Hal, more than ever he plunged into his work, finding in it solace from the thought that somehow he had failed Marcia, that somehow, although he could not figure out how, he could have avoided this tragedy. For Marcia's death did smack of suicide.

He saw Althea only professionally. Marcia's death had made him doubt himself in the role of husband; he did not know how Althea felt about him. He performed his

work skillfully, automatically. He was a stunned man. It was Simon Olmsted who brought him back to life.

He had invited Hal to dinner at the Century Club. Now they were sitting in its lovely library. Mr. Olmsted was smoking a huge, fragrant cigar. "I am going to make a speech, Harold," he said. (He had always called him Harold.) "It may ramble, but that's a privilege I have earned by my age. I am hoping it will do you some good.

"When you become an old man—and you will live to be an old man—you accept things that to youth seem unacceptable.

"I accepted you, Harold, because my daughter wanted you as her husband. I do not have to tell you that I always indulged Marcia. We have both paid—and she, too, poor thing—for that indulgence.

"I did not want you as her husband. I did not choose you. I wish that her usually unerring instinct had been right in your case.

"You may be surprised by what I shall now say. I knew from the beginning that your marriage could not last, or probably would last in name only. I did not, of course, foresee the finality of death.

"You have qualities I admire, Harold. Those very qualities warred with what was the substance of Marcia. She was intense, but she was shallow. She liked excitement and therefore change. Your single-mindedness, the very thing that makes you a fine doctor, clashed with her way of loving life.

"You were, in other words, too good for her, Harold. I may say that. I was her father. And I loved her.

"She was impulsive. She loved the Hospital—this I believe—and I think she loved you. But I believe you were more of an institution to her—the machine of a doctor—than a person.

"She had a feeling about your nurse, Miss Jones. She told me about her.

"I know little about her, but I have an idea you should marry her. I think Marcia would like you to. I think Miss Jones is the kind of woman you need, and I think you should marry again.

"This is the advice of an old man who has been around a lot.

"You will someday be the head of the Hospital. I approve, by the way, of your decision to turn over the money Marcia left you to the Hospital. From your own private practice you should have enough money for your needs."

He remembered Marcia telling him how she would build up a private practice for her husband and that he would never know she was doing it. This she had accomplished. It was another irony. There were so many in life, it seemed to Simon Olmsted.

"And now," Simon Olmsted concluded, rising to indicate their conversation—or rather, his speech—had come to an end, "I shall wish you well. I hope you will take my advice. A young man should not brood about the past. That is for oldsters like me.

"I shall not be seeing much of you, Harold. You will understand, of course. You remind me of my daughter. She had her faults, plenty of them, but she was still my little girl. One of these days you will have a child yourself. And you will understand even better.

"Good night, Harold," he said, extending his hand. "I hope my speech did you some good."

"It did, Mr. Olmsted. I want to thank you for it and for—" He was embarrassed, but he blurted it out. "—For being a great person."

Mr. Olmsted felt a glow of happiness at that—the first since Marcia's death. He was jauntily puffing on his cigar

after Hal left and one of his cronies, in a mock whisper, asked, "Come on, Simon. Let us in on the secret. On what stock did you make a killing today?"

Hal left the club, found a drugstore, and from its telephone booth called Althea.

"I would like to see you right away," he said. "May I call on you?"

"Certainly. Come right over."

"I'll be there in ten minutes or less."

Althea thought, as she gently cradled the telephone back into its stand, that she had been waiting for this call—for how long? Perhaps her entire lifetime.

Snow was falling. It was a year and six months after Marcia Meikeljohn's death, and the pavilion named in her honor was being opened. The fortune it had cost had been given by her husband, who had turned his entire inheritance over to the Hospital.

It was an important occasion. The Governor of New York made a speech.

And every doctor—and nurse—of importance was there also.

Althea Jones was there, as head of the unit that was to work in the Hospital's new heart-operation venture. And with her was Ruth Innes.

And Althea looked up at the platform at the man she knew would become her husband.

And Hal looked back and smiled.

Later, they were in his office, where once he had impulsively kissed her. She was still in her nurse's uniform, and she said,

"Oh, Doctor, this is conduct most unbecoming a nurse."

And he answered, as she wanted him to:

"But becoming to a woman. And you. And—the girl who will be my wife."

And now at last there was happiness.

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